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out much longer. But we have women and children with us, and we shall fight to the last and die game. Send help without an hour's delay, or it's all up.

J. T. SHIELDS."

Covered with dust, and reeking with sweat, with bloody nostril and dilated eye, the black mustang thundered up to the gate of the fort, staggered as if drunken, and then with a wheezing moan, shivered from nose to hoof, and with an awful cry, like that of a dying person, his flanks heaved and he dropped dead to the ground, his lithe, sinewy rider leaping from the saddle, just in time to escape being crushed to death.

Scarcely less frightful and alarming was the appearance of the horseman, so covered with dust and grime, that no one could tell whether he was Indian, African, or Caucasian; but, whoever he was, he showed that he was alive to the situation, by running straight through the gate of the stockades, into the parade-ground, where, pausing in a bewildered sort of way, he glanced hurriedly around, and then shouted:

"Where's the commandant? Quick! some one tell me!"

Colonel Greaves chanced to be standing at that moment in converse with a couple of his officers, and upon hearing the cry, he moved toward the stranger with a rapid tread, but with a certain dignified deliberation that always marked his movements. Knowing him to be the man for whom he was searching, the messenger did not wait for him to approach, but fairly bounded toward him, and thrusting a piece of dirty paper, scrawled over with lead pencil, looked imploringly in his face, while he read the words given above.

And as the colonel read, his brows knitted and his face paled. He felt the urgency of that despairing appeal, and he saw the almost utter impossibility of complying with it.

"When was this written?" he asked, of the dust-begrimed courier.

"At daybreak this morning," was the prompt reply.

"How far away are your friends?"

"Forty miles as the crow flies, and I have never drawn rein since my horse started, till he fell dead just outside the gate."

"How many men are there in this fix?"

"There were twenty men, and a dozen women and children. When I left about half that number were alive, and whether any are still living God only knows; I don't."

"I hope it is not as bad as that," said the colonel, again glancing at the paper, and involuntarily sighing, for despite his schooling upon the frontier, he felt keenly the anguish of this wail that was borne to him across the sad prairie. "Not as bad as that, I trust; for if they have held out two days, we may hope that they are able to hold out still longer. But how is it that *you* succeeded in reaching us, when they could not?"

Feeling that some explanation was expected of him, the messenger spoke hurriedly, but as calmly as possible:

"Twenty of us were conveying a party of women and children—the families of merchants and officers at Santa Fe—through the Indian country, on our way to that city, when the Comanches came down on us, in a swarm of hundreds, and finding there was no escaping a fight, we ran our wagons in a circle, shut the women and horses inside, and then it seemed as if hell was let loose upon us. Yelling, shouting, screeching, charging was kept up all that day into the night. We picked off the red devils with every shot, but the more we killed the thicker they came, seeming to spring up from the very ground, until the prairie was covered with them. At night we had a little rest, and we thought perhaps they would draw off and let us alone. Why they didn't make a charge upon our camp that night, I can not tell; but they only sent a few stray shots, more than one of which was fatal, and at daylight the fun began again, and never stopped till the sun went down, when there wasn't much of a pause then. That was yesterday, and we had it all through the night, and since we halted the day before yesterday, there hasn't been a drop of water for horse, man, woman or child, so that you can see what an awful strait they are in."

By this time quite a group had gathered about the messenger, enchain'd by the thrilling tale he told, the truth of which was so eloquently attested by his manner and appearance.

"But you haven't told us how *you* got here," reminded the colonel, as the man paused for a moment. "You have succeeded at least in insuring your safety."

"We made up our minds about midnight last night that something of the kind had to be done, as it was our only hope. Two of our men tried to steal through, crawling on hands and knees, but both were caught within a hundred yards of the camp—one shot dead, and the other so badly tomahawked, that he died within an hour of getting back to us. So I told Shields to let me have his mustang, which is the fleetest creature on the plains, and I would either get through or do as the others did. So, just about daybreak, I crammed that slip of paper in the side of my shoe, stretched out flat on the mustang's back and give him the word. Away he went like a thunderbolt, with the rifles cracking all about my ears, and the Comanches thundering down upon me like so many bloodhounds. I felt more than one bullet in my legs, and I knew the horse was hurt pretty bad—it didn't hinder his going, and the noble fellow kept straight along till he brought me here. But you act as if you didn't know me."

"Know you?" repeated the amazed colonel. "I never saw you before."

CHAPTER II.

THE ANSWER.

THE powdered, begrimed face was seen to expand into something like a grin, and raising his hand, the courier literally scraped the dust from his cheeks and eyebrows, and then, as he removed his hat, a general exclamation of amazement escaped all.

"Jim Gibbons! is it you?" called out the commandant, as he recognized a man who had been employed at his fort a year before. "I thought your voice had a familiar sound, but then your own mother would not have recognized you."

"But come," added Gibbons, moving about uneasily, "we'll talk over this matter some other time. I've brought you the message, colonel," he added, making a graceful military salute. "I had heard in St. Louis that you had been sent to another command, else I would have known whom to ask for. Now, can you help us or not?"

The officer folded his arms behind his back, and walked slowly over the parade-ground, signifying by a nod of his head that Gibbons should do the same.

"I must help you," he said, in a low voice; "such a call as that can not pass unheeded. But, Jim, you see my fix. We ought to have a full regiment to garrison this fort, and the Government allows me but six hundred. Two hundred of these men are on a scout up toward the mountains, and won't be in till dark. Do you know, there is some reason to fear an attack upon the fort, from a combination of several tribes under the direction of the infernal Comanche, Swico-Cheque?"

"Why, he is at the head of the devils that have our friends walled in. I know him too well, and have seen him a dozen times, circling around on his horse, yelling like a thousand panthers, and firing about a dozen shots a minute. I have fired at him five or six times, but never grazed him once."

"Well, I think it is more than likely that we shall have an attack from him. Now, you know something of life on the plains; tell me how many men you need to bring your friends into the fort?"

"We ought to have a hundred, at the least."

"You ought to have five hundred at the smallest calculation. I tell you the Indians in this part of the country are among the best fighters and hunters in the world, and if I send a hundred men out into the country, where they are sure to come against old Swico and his band, the chances are that they will all be served as were Colonel Fetterman's men at Fort Phil Kearney, a month or two ago. You know that over a hundred of them went out, and never a one was ever seen alive again."

"But, if I understand that matter right," replied Gibbons, who was becoming impatient and uneasy at the delay, "these men were entrapped and massacred; I don't think there is any likelihood of that in our case. But, colonel, pardon me; I wish to know your decision, either one way or the other, at once. If you conclude that you cannot spare a hundred men to go forty miles away to help this party, then let us have a fresh horse. I will return, sail in and go under with the rest."

And Gibbons attested the earnestness of what he said, by starting to move away; but Colonel Greaves caught his arm.

"Hold on! you shall have the men you need. I have been trying ever since I heard your story to decide whether I ought to risk the safety of a hundred men to save one-tenth that number; but I can't think. It seems to me that I hear the wailing cry of those women and children coming over the prairie, and if I should turn my back upon them, their voices and moans would follow me ever afterward in my waking and sleeping hours. Yes, Jim, you shall have the hundred men. I will lead them myself, and we will make hot work in that gulch before we get through."

The colonel, having made his decision, did not hesitate for a moment. Turning sharply upon his heel, he beckoned to the adjutant, and gave him peremptory orders to make ready a hundred men for a scout into the Indian country. They were to be armed with rifle, revolver and cavalry swords, and to be mounted on the best horses at the fort.

As he turned about to say a few words to Gibbons, he saw the tears making furrows down his grimy cheeks. He attempted to speak, but for a few seconds was unable to articulate. Taking the hand of the colonel, he finally said, in a choking voice:

"I thank you, colonel, and God grant that this may not be too late. Oh, if you could have seen those pleading faces of the women, those cries of the helpless children for one swallow of water, the dead bodies of the men that we had drawn in behind the wagons out of reach of the red-skins, and the screeching devils all around, you would send your whole garrison to their rescue. Where is Lightning Jo?"

"He went out with the scouting party this morning, and that is what caused me to hesitate about sending the company to the help of your friends. I always feel tolerably comfortable when I know that he is at the head of the men."

While the bustle of hurried preparation was going on within the fort, Gibbons accompanied the colonel to his lodgings, where he washed the dust from his person, partook of water and refreshments, and explained more in detail the particulars of the misfortune of his friends. He was equally desirous that the wonderful scout, Lightning Jo, should lead the party, as he was a host of himself, and having lived from earliest childhood in the South-west, he was as thorough an Indian as the great chieftain, Swico-Cheque himself, and the daring Comanches held him in greater terror than any other living personage.

But the case was one that admitted of no delay—even if it was certain that Jo would be in at the end of an hour. Half that time might decide the fate of the little Spartan band struggling so bravely in

Dead Man's Gulch, and the release of the beleaguered ones was now the question above all others.

It required but a very short time for the party to complete their preparations. Out of the seemingly inextricable confusion of stamping horses, and men running hither and thither, all at once appeared full one hundred men, mounted, armed and officered precisely as they had been directed.

An orderly stood holding the horse of Colonel Greaves, until he was ready to mount, while another was at Gibbons's disposal.

The next moment the two latter had leaped into their saddles, and placing themselves at the head of the cavalcade, rode out of the stockade upon the open prairie, which had scarcely been done, when a new and most gratifying surprise awaited them. The march was instantly halted, and the face of Colonel Greaves and of Gibbons lit up with pleasure.

CHAPTER III.

LIGHTNING JO.

THAT which arrested the attention of the company riding out of the stockade of Fort Adams, was the sight of another party of horsemen coming through a range of hills about half a mile distant, one glance only being sufficient to identify them as the scouts already referred to as being under the guidance and leadership of the great western celebrity, Lightning Jo.

"Now, that's what I call lucky," exclaimed Colonel Greaves. "Jo is the very man of all others that we need."

The horsemen rode down the declivity at an easy gallop, and shortly reined up in front of the stockade, with a graceful salute, and an action that indicated that he awaited the command of his superior officer.

The scouts, or hunters had turned their time to good account, as was shown by a number of buffalo carcasses, or rather the choice portions of such, supported across the saddles of their animals; the appearance of the beasts, too, indicated that many of them had been subjected to the hardest kind of riding.

A few words explained to Lightning Jo the business about to be undertaken, and he at once assumed his position as leader of the company that had just prepared to start, the colonel withdrawing into the fort again, where it was his manifest duty to remain, while the desperate attempt to relieve the beleaguered party in Dead Man's Gulch was being made,

The scout did not take a fresh horse, and when pressed to do so, he declared that his mustang was as capable of a fifty-mile tramp, as he was upon the morning he started upon the hunt from which he had just returned.

"Come, boys! business is business," said he, in his crisp, sharp tones, as his steed carried him by one or two bounds to the head of the cavalcade he was to lead. "Come, Gibbons, keep yer place alongside me, and yer can explain as we ride along."

And as the company of brave men gallop to the southward on their errand of mercy, each man a hero, and all with set teeth and an unalterable determination in their hearts to do all that mortal man could do to save the despairing little band that had sent its wail of anguish across the prairie, we will improve the occasion by glancing at the remarkable man who acted as their leader.

Lightning Jo had gained his appellation from the wonderful quickness of his movements, and his almost miraculous skill as a scout. His celerity of movement was incredible, while his equally astonishing strength excited the wonder of the most famous bordermen of the day. It was a well-established fact that Lightning Jo, a couple of years before, at Fort Laramie, had been forced into a personal encounter with a badgering pugilist, who was on his return to the States from California, and who had the reputation of being one of the most scientific hitters that had ever entered the prize ring, and who on the occasion referred to was so completely polished off by Jo, that he lay for a month at the fort before he recovered from his injuries.

It was said, and there was every reason to believe it, that he was capable of running miles with the speed of the swiftest mustang of the prairie: that he had traversed the Llano Estacado back and forth, times without number, on foot, passing through the very heart of the Comanche country, without any attempt to disguise himself, or conceal his identity in any way; and yet there was not a mark upon his person to attest the danger through which he had passed scathless and unharmed.

His horsemanship was perfect in its way, and no living Comanche—the most wonderful riders on the Western Continent—had been known to exceed, and very few to equal him. For the amusement of those gathered at some of the posts which he had visited, he had ridden his mustang at full speed and bare back, throwing himself from one side to the other, and firing from beneath the neck or belly of the animal, picking up his hat from the earth when galloping, at the same headlong rate, striking a match upon a stone on the ground and carrying the blaze lighted in his hand. He had thrown the lasso, with such skill, as to catch the hoof of the plunging buffalo, and then by a flit of the rope, flung the kicking brute flat upon his side, as the daring rider thundered past, and slapped his hat in the eyes of the terrified animal. He could fling the coil with the uring certainty of a rifle-shot, and would manipulate the rope into as many fantastical convolutions as a Chinese conjuror.

His prowess with the rifle was equally marked, and the tales of his achievements with his favorite weapon were so incredible in many instances, that we would not be believed were we to repeat them. He carried a long, murderous-looking weapon, the

mountings of which were of solid silver, and had been presented to him by one of his many friends, whom he had been the instrument of saving.

At the home of his old mother at Santa Fe—the only living relative he had upon earth—he had rifles, swords, guns and every manner of weapon, of the most costly and valuable nature, that had been given him by grateful friends. His revered parent during his absence was literally overwhelmed with attentions and kindness by virtue of her relationship to Lightning Jo, the scout and guide who had proved such a blessing to the settlers of, and travelers through the West.

The hero was about thirty years of age, slim and tall to attenuation, with high cheek-bones, eyes of midnight blackness that snapped fire when he was roused, and long hair, as stiff, wiry and black as the tail of his mustang. His countenance was swarthy, and with a little "touching up" he might have deceived Swico himself into the belief that he was one of his own warriors. This was the more easy as Jo spoke the Comanche tongue with the fluency of a genuine member of that warlike tribe; but he scorned such suggestions when made to him, declaring that he was able to take care of himself anywhere and in any crowd, no matter who were his friends or who were his enemies, an assertion which no one cared to dispute in a practical way.

Looking at his profile as he rode along over the prairie at a sweeping gallop, it would have been seen that his nose was large, thin and sharp, the chin rather prominent, and the lips thin. The mouth was rather large, and the upper lip shaded by a thin, silky mustache of the same jetty hue as his eyes. The rest of his face was totally devoid of beard, except a little furze in front of his ears. He had never used the razor, nor did he expect to do so.

Of course he sat his horse like a centaur, and, as he rode along, those keen, restless eyes of his wandered and roved from side to side, almost unconsciously on his part, as he was ever on the alert for the first appearance of danger. Such in brief were a few of the noticeable points of the great scout, Lightning Jo, who was a leader of the party of rescue, and who is to play such a prominent part in the thrilling events we are about to narrate.

As he rode beside Gibbons, whose anxiety was of the most intense character, and who could not avoid giving frequent expression to it, the scout at length said:

"Just stop that 'ere fretting of yours, now, Gib; 'cause it don't pay; don't you see we're all stretching out on that 'ere forty miles, just as fast as horse-flesh kin stand it? Wal, that being so, where's the use of fuming?"

"I know, Jo, but how can a person help it when he knows not whether his friends are dead or alive? There is philosophy in your advice about whining and complaining, and it reminds me of one of the members of the party—a young lady whose disposition had something heavenly in it."

"Who was she?" asked the scout, in an indifferent way.

"Her name, I believe, was Manning—Lizzie Manning—"

"What!" exclaimed Lightning Jo, almost bounding from his saddle, "is she there, in that infernal place? How in the name of Heaven did she get there?"

"She was one of the party that left St. Louis, and of course shared our dangers the same as all."

"The sweetest, purest, best little piece of calico that has been heard," repeated the scout to himself. "God save her, for she's worth all the rest. Come, boys," he called out to those behind him, "ride your horses as you never rid 'em afore. I'd dash through fire, water, smoke, brimstone and blazes, to save that gal!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE PARTY IN DEAD MAN'S GULCH.

LEAVING Lightning Jo and his party riding at a tremendous rate over the prairie to the rescue of the sorely beleaguered company in Dead Man's Gulch, we must precede him for awhile to that terrible spot, where one of the most dreadful tragedies of the many there enacted was going on.

The party, numbering over thirty, two-thirds of whom were hardened, bronzed hunters, had been driven tumultuously into the place by the sudden appearance of the notorious Swico-Cheque and his band, where they had barely time to throw their men and horses into the roughest attitude of defense, when they were called upon to fight the screeching Comanches, in one of the most murderous and desperate hand-to-hand encounters in which they had ever been engaged.

Our readers have already learned, from the hurried words of Gibbons, something of the experience of the beleaguered whites during the two days and nights immediately following the halt, and preceding his own departure, and it is not our purpose to weary them and harrow their feelings by a recital of the horrible incidents of that stubborn fight.

When Jim Gibbons, hugging the neck of his mustang, dashed at full speed through the lines of the Comanches, he left behind him ten able-bodied men, or, more properly, ten who were still able to load, aim and fire their rifles. More than that number lay scattered around, among the wagons, on the ground, in every position, killed by the bullets of the wonderful red riders and riflemen.

The wagons, as is the practice at such times, had been run together into an irregular circle, one being placed in the center (as the safest spot), into which the women and children were tumbled, and where, for the time, they were safe from the bullets that were rattling like sleet around them, and striking down their brave defenders upon every hand.

This done, the men devoted themselves to keeping

back the swarming devils that made a perfect realization of pandemonium as they circled about the doomed band.

In what way Dead Man's Gulch gained its name no one can tell with any certainty, but most probably from the number of massacres and deaths that had taken place within its horrid precincts. It was simply a hollow, somewhat resembling the dried-up bed of a small lake, and, instead of being properly a gulch, was more like a basin, so that to enter it from any direction one was compelled to descend quite a slope.

The trail which the party were following led directly through the center of this place, being by far the most feasible route, in spite of the ascent and descent, on account of the broken nature of the country both to the north and south.

Dead Man's Gulch, occupying an area of several acres, was strewed and covered with bones, as if indeed it were the site of some ancient catacomb that had been rent in twain by some convulsion of nature.

A slight examination would have shown that these bones were those of horses and human beings, telling in most eloquent language to the beleaguered whites that the fate which threatened them was that which had overtaken many a one before them.

Dead Man's Gulch indeed was a favorite point of the Comanches, who were always roving the prairies in search of such bands as these, and it was consequently well known and dreaded by all who were compelled to make the journey; and the scene to which we now direct the attention of the reader was, as we have shown, a repetition of what had been enacted there time and again without number.

The first day's fight was especially destructive upon the horses, it being found almost impossible to shelter them from the aim of the Comanches. As a consequence, the second morning found but few of these indispensable requisites in a journey of this kind. Those that had escaped, however, were secured and sheltered in such a way as to keep them from the other bullets that endeavored to seek them out.

Captain Shields, a sturdy borderer, and a man who had crossed the plains a score of times, suspected from the first that the only possible hope for his company was for some one to get through the Comanche lines to Fort Adams, and that was the reason why he so carefully protected the two or three remaining mustangs from death.

This, as a matter of course, was the last desperate resort, and was only to be attempted when it was absolutely certain that nothing else could avail.

His first hope was that by a determined and deadly resistance he could convince the red-skins that it would not pay to keep up the contest, for the warlike Comanches have the reputation of possessing discretion as well as bravery; but, in the present case, they certainly were warranted in concluding they had the game in their own hands, and, despite the murderous replies of the whites, they refused to be driven away, and kept up a dropping fire, circling round and round the hills above, and preventing any attempts of the whites to move out.

For some time Captain Shields and his men fired from behind their horses and wagons, but they soon improved on this, and taking their positions in the wagons themselves, found that they were quite well able to pick off their assailants, while they were tolerably well protected from the return fire, the redskins being compelled to fire more at random.

And lying in this posture, they were compelled to see the remaining horses shot down, excepting the single one upon which Jim Gibbons made his escape.

And thus the fight—of itself one of the most bitter and sanguinary among the thousand and one of the West—raged, and as it raged there were exhibited some of the most daring performances on both sides, and among them all was no loftier nor higher-souled courage than that of our heroine—the young and beautiful Lizzie Manning of Santa Fe.

CHAPTER V.

THE PARTY OF RESCUE.

THE sun was past the meridian, when the hundred men, under the command of Lightning Joe, left Fort Adams and struck off in almost a due southerly direction.

It required sharp riding to reach Dead Man's Gulch by nightfall; but all had strong hopes of doing so, as it was summer-time, and a goodly number of hours yet remained at their command, while their mustangs were toughened and fleet, and they were now put to the full test of their endurance.

Lightning Joe knew very well the location of the fatal gulch, and although he did not say as much, yet he had very little hope of reaching it in time to be of any earthly use to the poor wretches crammed up there and fighting so desperately for life.

Swico could not fail to know the meaning of the flight of Gibbons through his lines. He must know that he was making all haste to Fort Adams for succor, and that, if he did not speedily complete the awful business he had taken in hand, without much longer delay, the chances were that he would be disputed and compelled to fight a third party.

The prairie continued quite level, with dry grass that did not prevent a cloud of dust arising from the hoofs of the horses. The plain was broke here and there by ridges and hills, some of the latter of considerable elevation. Between these the rescuing parties were compelled frequently to pass, some of them being so close together that the thought of an ambuscade was instantly suggested to the mind of every one.

But Jo was not the man to go it blind into any contrivance that the red-skins might set to entrap him,

and his practiced eye made certain that all was right before he exposed his brave men to such danger.

He was rather expecting some flank movement upon the part of his bold enemy, but he was disposed to believe that, whatever plan he adopted, he would not "try it on" until the whites reached the vicinity of Dead Man's Gulch.

"Mebbe he's got things fixed to tumble us in there too," he thought to himself; "and mebbe ef he has, he'll find his flint will miss fire."

The company galloped steadily forward until something like three-fourths of the distance was passed, and the sun was low in the west. They were riding along at the same rattling pace, all on the alert for signs of their enemies, and they were just "rising a swell of moderate elevation, flanked on both sides by still higher hills, when the peremptory voice of Lightning Jo was heard, ordering a halt.

The command was obeyed with extraordinary precision, and every man knew as if by instinct that trouble was at hand. Naturally enough their eyes were turned toward the hills, as if expecting to see a band of Comanches swarming down upon them, and in imagination they heard the blood-curdling yells, as they poured tumultuously over the elevations, exulting in the work of death at their hands.

"All was still, for could they detect any thing to warra... fear, altho' the manner of Lightning Jo indicated clearly that such was the case.

He did not keep them long in suspense.

"Some of the Comanches are there," remarked Lightning Jo, in his off-hand manner; "whether old Swico himself is among 'em or not, I can't say till I go forward and find out. Keep your guns and pistols ready, for there may be a thousand of 'em down on ye afore ye know it."

And with this parting salutation, or rather warning, the scout started his horse on a gallop, straight toward the rise, as though he purposed to ride directly between the hills already mentioned. But seemingly on the very point of entering, he turned his mustang sharply to one side, and instead of passing between, circled around the hill upon his right.

All this time he sat as erect and proud in his saddle as though he were approaching the stockade of the fort, which he had made his head-quarters for so many years.

The cavalrymen, as a matter of course, scrutinized his movements with the intensest interest.

"How easy for a stray shot to tumble him out of his saddle!" was the reflection of nearly every one watching the daring soldier.

This action of Lightning Jo speedily carried him over a portion of the ridge, and out of sight of the horsemen, who could only surmise what was going on beyond.

But the sharp, pistol-like crack of a rifle, within five minutes of the time he had vanished from view, proved that the fears of Lightning Jo were well founded, and that the drama had already opened in dead earnest.

Indeed it had. The scout had detected all-convincing signs of the presence of his old enemies upon the hill, and the simple artifice of turning aside, at the last moment, had given him the advantage of flanking his foes, and coming upon them from altogether an unexpected quarter.

As he passed over the ridge, Jo saw about twenty Comanche Indians sitting quietly upon their horses, and in a position that indicated that they were composedly expecting the appearance of their prey from another quarter. Instead of turning to flee, the scout saluted them in his customary manner by bringing up his rifle, and boring a hole through the skull of one of the astonished red-skins, before the rest really suspected what was going on.

"Tahoo—oo!" called out Jo, as he witnessed the success of his shot, and he followed it up with another yell that was peculiarly his own, and which was so impossible of imitation that he was known by it from Arizona to Mexico.

The Comanches were not men of wood to sit still upon their animals, and remain targets for one of the most skillful riflemen living.

Identifying their assailant by means of his yell, they instantly scattered, as if a bombshell had landed among them, and they scampered down the other side of an adjoining hill, and out of sight of Jo, carrying their fallen comrade with them.

This, it would seem, ought to have satisfied the scout, but it did not. He suspected that a larger party of Indians was in the neighborhood, and determined to make sure before returning to his men.

The actions of the Comanches seemed to indicate that they were about making an attempt to surround him, and he made ready to guard against it.

"Let 'em surround me! I feel wolfish to-day, and I think it'll do me good to let off some of my extra steam among 'em."

He gazed furtively over his shoulder nevertheless, for he had no wish to be taken off his guard, in such a desperate encounter as this was certain to prove, in case a collision occurred.

His mustang stepped very carefully, with his head raised and his ears pricked, for he fully felt the delicacy of the situation, and knew that at any moment they were liable to be enveloped by a horde of their enemies.

The sagacity of the horse was the first to give notice of the approach of danger. He was stepping stealthily along, his senses on the alert, when he suddenly paused, with a slight whinny.

At the same instant Lightning Jo caught a peculiar sound, as if made by the grating of a horse's hoof upon the gravel, and he turned his head with the quickness of lightning.

There they were, sure enough!

CHAPTER VI.

LIGHTNING JO IN A SCRIMMAGE.

YES; Lightning Jo found that the Comanches were coming, and at a rather rapid rate, too. There was no flinging himself over the side of his mustang and making him a shield against the blows of the redskins, for the latter were on every side of him. The fact was they had recognized that peculiar yell of his, and hastily laid their plans to make him prisoner.

But Jo wasn't made a prisoner yet, by a long shot, and finding that he was at a disadvantage on the back of his steed, he quietly slipped off, looping his rifle by a contrivance of his own to his side, he whipped out a couple of revolvers, one in either hand, and the fun began on the instant.

It wasn't the way of Jo to await the opening of a game like this, but to open it himself; and the instant he could cock the handy little weapons, he began popping away right and left, the astounded Comanches going down like ten-pins before the savage "bull-dogs" who had a way of biting every time they gave utterance to a bark. But here were but ten such "bites" available, and carefully as the scout husbanded his ammunition, the barrels were speedily emptied without any sensible diminution of his peril.

There was no one Comanche, nor no single half-dozen of them, that would have believed it possible to secure possession of Lightning Jo, and so they went into the scrimmage in such overwhelming numbers that escape upon his part looked impossible. By the time the barrels of his revolvers were emptied, there were fully fifty Indians surrounding him. Nearly, if not quite all of them, were mounted, and they were not the men to show mercy to such a character as Lightning Jo, who had worked more mischief against the tribe than any dozen frontiersmen with whom they had exchanged shots.

Had this indomitable scout been alone upon the prairie his fighting would undoubtedly have been of the most terrific nature, and he would have died, like Colonel Crockett at the Alamo, with an "army of dead" about him; but with all of Jo's wonderful prowess, he saw that the assistance of his friends was needed, and without any hesitation he gave utterance to his "call," which reached the ears of his listening cavalrymen, who were equally prompt in responding to the cry.

But the time that must elapse between the call and the arrival of reinforcements, short as it was, was all-sufficient for the Comanches to encompass the death of a dozen antagonists, unless they were checked by a most stubborn and skillful resistance.

And just that resistance and that fight now took place.

Instead of clubbing his rifle and using the weapon in that shape, as almost any man would have done, Jo now had recourse to that wonderful science in which he was such an adept, demonstrating that to such a man there is no weapon at his command like the naked fist.

It was a treat to see him use his powers, and had he only possessed a rock or wall to back against, so as to prevent an insidious approach from behind, he could have kept off the Comanche nation, so long as they lunged up to him in such a blind, headlong fashion as the present.

The posture taken by Lightning Joe was according to the latest "rules of the London prize-ring," and consisted in having his arms up in front of him, the left slightly in advance, while he balanced himself upon his left foot, so poised that he was "firm on his pins," or ready to leap backward or forward, as necessity demanded.

The foremost Comanche, who had dismounted, was almost up to Jo, when he thought somebody's mustang had kicked him fairly in the face, and he made three back summersets before he could put the brake on. And then, just as he was getting up, he was knocked down again by a couple of his comrades going over him, and then, as those arms began working like piston-rods, and with a velocity a hundred times as great, the cracking of heads was something like the going off of a pack of Chinese crackers ignited together.

Heads were down and heels up, as the redskins leaped from the backs of their animals and charged in upon the scout, who, as cool as when partaking of a leisurely meal, allowed every one to come just within reach of his iron knuckles, when he let drive like a cannon shot.

Finding that it was impossible to take him afoot, several of the redskins attempted to ride him down; but there was something in his appearance as he thus acted upon the defensive that prevented them from approaching too close, just as the bravest horse will recoil from the bear when he faces about.

Then, too, as it became apparent that there was no capturing the scout in front, the Indians exerted themselves to the utmost to steal around in his rear, and to fling him to the ground. This kept things lively for the time, and the way Lightning Joe spun around and danced upon his legs, striking incessantly and occasionally putting in a terrific kick now and then, was a marvel in itself.

Now he seemed to be down and out of sight, but the next instant he popped up from some other point, and sent in a volley of blows with the same lightning-like force and skill. The Indian that clutched at him and was certain he had got him, clutched the empty air, and did get, along the head, in such a way that he ever after held him in the most vivid remembrance.

All this was thrilling and, in a certain sense, amusing; but after all, despite the extraordinary skill and quickness displayed by the scout, it could not really extricate him from the difficulty. A man has but two arms with which to guard himself, and when he is pressed from every point, with an increasing pres-

sure, no human being can keep such a swarm at a distance. He is like the man set upon by thousands of rats.

Furthermore, although Jo knew that his friends were making all haste to his rescue, yet he saw things could not remain as they were even until then.

He therefore determined to make a desperate attempt to break through the surrounding lines.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ANGEL OF THE PRAIRIE.

In the awful sufferings to which communities and companies are sometimes doomed, it is often found that the most delicate and refined females display the greatest fortitude and the truest heroism. When the terrible calamity came upon Captain Shields and his party, it was generally supposed that the first to succumb from sheer terror alone, would be the frail, blue-eyed, laughing Lizzie Manning, whose gentleness of heart, and mirthful ways, had won the affections of all, before the journey from St. Louis was fairly begun.

There was a blanching of the damask cheek, a faint scream of fear, when the half-naked Comanches suddenly burst forth to view, and sent in their first volley, and she scrambled nimbly into the "fort," as the refuge wagon was termed, thoughtful enough, however, to be the very last one to enter. By the time she had taken her place upon the straw-covered floor upon the bottom, her courage had returned to her, or more properly speaking, she rose to the situation, and displayed a lofty courage and a rare good sense that excited the wonder and compelled the admiration of all.

By her aid, the screaming, terrified children were speedily quieted, and the scarcely less frantic mothers were made to realize that their own safety lay in retaining their self-possession, and keeping themselves and their children out of range of the rifle-balls that were clipping the canvas covering of the wagon, and burying themselves in the planking all about them. By this means something like order was obtained in the crowded little party, and they had nothing to do but to watch furtively the fighting going on all round them, to look at the horrid Comanches circling back and forth, with wonderful contortions upon their horses, to see their frightful grimaces, and the flash of their rifles almost in their very faces, as they seemed to be rushing down as if about to overwhelm and crush the little party out of existence.

It was a thrilling sight that they looked upon, as they saw these Indians pitching headlong from their saddles; but their hearts were wrung with anguish as they saw more than one of their own number fall, some at full length beneath the wagons, and others among the floundering horses, where their deaths were frequently hastened by the hoofs of the frantic animals.

Suddenly Lizzie Manning, sprung from the wagon, and heedless of the hurtling bullets, started to run across the open space inclosed by the irregular circle of wagons. She had taken but a few steps, when a young man dashed out from the rear of one of the lumbering wagons, and excitedly waved her back.

"For Heaven's sake, Lizzie, back this instant!" he called out, walking rapidly toward her in his anxiety; "it is sure death to advance. Wait not a second!"

She paused, as if the voice had a familiar sound, and stared in a bewildered way at the speaker, a fine, manly-looking young fellow, whose hair was blown about his face, and whose pale countenance and flashing eyes showed that he appreciated the danger, and had the courage not to flinch before it.

Only for a moment did the young maiden pause, and then (only a few feet separating them, as he had continued advancing from the first) she pointed to the prostrate figure of a man beneath the wagons.

"There is Harrison, who has been so kind to me, ever since we started—he fell just now, and stretched out his arms for help. I must go to him."

"He is past all help," said the man, solemnly, "and you will only lose your own life if you venture near him, for he took one of the most dangerous posts of all."

"Nevertheless, he may be alive, and I may be of help to him."

And as she spoke, the maiden hurried on to where the prostrate and now silent figure of one of her defenders lay. The distance was short, but as Egbert Rodman had declared, it was encompassed with death; and for one moment he meditated seizing the arm of the girl, and compelling her by main force to return to the shelter of the wagon; but something in her manner and appearance restrained him; and, forgetful of his own peril, he gazed with an awed feeling, as he would have watched the tread of an angel upon this sinful earth of ours.

With a somewhat rapid tread, but without any undue haste, and certainly without any fear, Lizzie advanced straight to the wagon where the poor fellow lay, flat upon his back, and directly between the wheels, motionless and with one knee drawn up, as if asleep.

Kneeling down she took the hand still warm in her own, and with the other brushed back the dark hair from the forehead of the man, and asked, in that wonderfully sweet voice of hers:

"Oh, Mr. Harrison, is there nothing I can do for you?"

He opened his eyes, and looked at her with a dim wildness, his face ashy pale, and then something like a smile lit up his ghastly features, as he pointed to his breast.

"My wife—my babe—darling Nelly—"

She understood him, and drew from his breast-pocket a photograph of his wife—with a rosy-cheeked, smiling cherub of a little girl, laughing beside her knee.

"Tell them—my last thoughts—my last prayers were of them—" he stammered.

"I will—I will," said the girl. "Is there nothing more I can do?"

He made an effort to speak, but the words were choked in their utterance, and with his eyes fixed upon hers, he died without a struggle.

But that one soulful, grateful look of those dark eyes, as they faded out in death, amply repaid the brave-hearted Lizzie Manning for the noble deed she had done, and she rose to her feet, glad that she had heeded the mute call of the dying man, who could have scarcely hoped, at such a time and under such circumstances, any heed would have been paid to it, unless it were the mocking taunts of the merciless Comanches.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DARING DEED.

In the meantime the battle was raging with infernal hotness. All of Captain Shields's party were unerring marksmen, and they were so accustomed to the most desperate contests with the red-skins, that despite the terrible strait in which they were placed, they preserved their coolness and equipoise like true veterans, and loaded and fired with such rapid sureness, that to this alone may be attributed the severe check which kept the Comanches from making an overwhelming charge, that would have carried everything before them.

The first night passed with little disturbance, as we have already shown, and the second day the battle was renewed and kept up with scarcely an intermission until nightfall.

This day, especially the latter portion, was very warm, and the suffering of the little band was terrible—so much so, that many of the living envied the dead, who had been so speedily released from their distress. The thirst felt by all was a perpetual torment, from which there was scarcely the slightest relief. Many of the men, despite the great danger, dug into the ground, until the damp soil was reached, which they scooped up and placed in their mouths as a slight assuagement of their anguish.

The females stood the trial like martyrs, for their own greatest suffering was that of seeing the half-dozen moaning children piteously begging for water, when there was none to give them.

The history of the world has proven that men will run any risk, no matter what, for the sake of satisfying the maddening thirst that threatens to drive them raving wild; and it was this that was the cause of one of the most daring deeds ever recorded, upon the part of young Egbert Rodman.

The Comanches could not but be aware of this fearful distress of the whites, and with a fiendish malignity, characteristic of the Indian race, just at nightfall, when the Dead Man's Gulch was bathed in mellow twilight, one of the red-skins was seen to leap off his mustang and walk toward the encampment, with a large tin canteen in his hand—a relic undoubtedly of some massacre of United States soldiers.

There was a lull in the firing at this moment, and the whites, at a loss to understand the meaning of the proceeding, stealthily peered out from their coverts in the wagons, to learn what new trick was on the tops.

It looked as if he were going to summon them to surrender, or call for a parley, as he walked straight forward until he was within a hundred feet of the nearest wagon, when he paused and held up the canteen before him, contorting his face into the most grotesque grimaces, and shaking the vessel in front and over his head.

The stillness at this moment was so profound that more than one distinctly heard the gurgle of water in the vessel, and, if any doubt remained of the red-skin's purpose, it was dissipated by his calling out, in broken English:

"Yengee—come—muchee drink—hab muchee drink—"

These words were scarcely uttered, when *crack, crack* went two rifles almost simultaneously, and the foolhardy wretch made a scrambling leap, and his taunting words ended in a wild howl, as he fell prostrate across the car that he had brandished so tormentingly in the faces of the sufferers.

It is strange that such a dog should not have known the risk he ran in making such a taunt.

The Indian had scarcely fallen when several of his comrades started down the declivity to bring away his body. At the same moment, Egbert Rodman, who was in one of the wagons, sprung out, and was seen to run at full speed in the direction of the fallen man.

"Come back! come back! or you're a dead man!" shouted Captain Shields, divining his purpose on the instant.

But the young man's lips were set, and he was determined upon possessing that canteen, if it were within the range of human possibility. He saw a horde of Comanches swarming down the gulch on a full run, screeching like demons, and evidently certain of securing the daring Yengee, whose torturing thirst had stolen away his senses.

But Egbert was not to be deterred by any such appalling danger as this. Now that he had undertaken the desperate task, nothing but death should turn him aside.

In far less time than it requires to be narrated, he had sped over the intervening ground, and was at the prostrate figure. He was fleet of foot, and he ran as he never ran before, reaching it, however, only a few seconds in advance of the rescuing Co-

manches, one of whom actually fired and missed him, when scarcely a rod in advance.

One tremendous jerk of his arm, and Egbert threw the dead Indian off the canteen, and catching it up in his hand, he turned about and started at the same headlong speed for the encampment, clinging to the vessel as if it was his own life; but the Comanches were all about him, and it looked as if it was all up, when he whipped out his only weapon—his revolver, and blazed away right and left in their very faces. At the same instant the whites opened fire, and made such havoc, that in the confusion Egbert made a dash, and sped like a reindeer for the wagons, and leaped in behind them with the canteen and the water and himself intact.

Then a shout went up from within the little band, and making his way to the central wagon, Egbert first furnished the moaning children with several swallows of the delicious—(oh, how delicious) fluid, no argument inducing Lizzie Manning to take a drop, until all her companions had first done so.

Then the brave fellow made his way from man to man, every one partaking of the soul-reviving cold water, whose delicious taste could not have been approached by the “nectar of the gods.”

All drank moderately, for they knew that Egbert was to come last, and nothing could induce one to cut his allowance short; and so he let several swallows gurgle down his parched throat, when he carried the remainder to the women’s wagon, and placing it in the hands of Lizzie, said:

“Keep it for the poor suffering little ones and for yourselves. We are hardy men, and can stand thirst better than they, and know how to chew our bullets, when we have nothing else!”

With many a fervent blessing upon the poor fellow’s head, the canteen was accepted and preserved as he requested.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LOVERS.

THE second night the moon, that rode high on the sky, enabled the little party of white men in Dead Man’s Gulch to detect the Comanches as they prowled about, and our friends proved the vigilance by picking off every one who thus exposed himself to their deadly rifles.

For the first half of the night little rest was obtained by either side—the spitting shots continuing with a rapidity, and in such numbers, as sometimes to resemble platoon firing—but, shortly past the turn of night, the Comanches seemed to grow weary of the incessant din, and being a fair target for the whites so long as they remained on the hill, where they were brought in fair relief against the sky, they assumed safer positions, and for a long time perfect silence remained.

By this time, despite the respite afforded by the captured canteen, the condition of the party was as desperate as it could be. Although the whites had been very careful in exposing themselves to the aim of the Comanches, yet so deadly had it been that there were now only ten men left, including Gibbons. Shortly after midnight two of these made the attempt to steal through the environing lines, and both lost their lives, in the manner recorded elsewhere. This left but eight able-bodied men to continue the defense, and Gibbons began arranging his flight with Shields, they keeping it a secret from the rest, and as it was feared that there would be a strife as to who should go, every one being anxious to get out of such a hell as Dead Man’s Gulch by any means, so long as a suitable pretext could be found.

But one horse was left unharmed. The others were dead, stretched in different places around the open space, and, under the warm sun, an odor of the most offensive character was beginning to rise from them. Worse still, there were men here and there, and some of them in wagons, to whom the rite of sepulture could not be given; and they lay, with dark, discolored faces, staring up to the sky, happier than were those who were left behind to struggle and fight on, only to die at last a still more dreadful death than had come to them.

All was still, and in the large wagons devoted to the shelter of the women and children, the latter were sound asleep, as were most of the former. Lizzie Manning had endeavored to inspire hope in the despairing ones around her, and was now sitting, with folded hands, upon a blanket, her shawl gathered over her shoulders, and in that attitude was awaiting sleep, when she heard a faint footstep near her, and turning her head, descried the figure of Egbert Rodman advancing, with a hesitating step, in that direction, his actions indicating that he felt considerable doubt as to the propriety of that which he was doing.

Believing that he was seeking an opportunity to say something to her, Lizzie spoke to him in a low, reassuring voice.

“Well, Egbert, is it I that you wish to see? If so, come nearer, where your voice will not be so likely to be heard.”

“I was wondering whether you were asleep or not,” he replied, making his way to the rear of the wagon, where her face could be seen, looking encouragingly out upon him. “There is no fighting going on at present; it won’t do for one to go to sleep, and I was thinking that possibly you might be awake, and with no ability to close your eyes in slumber. But, if you have, don’t fail to say so, and I will wait until to-morrow, or until there is a more favorable opportunity.”

“You need not leave, Egbert,” she said. “I did not sleep a single minute last night, nor can I do so to-night. I am glad that you have come, that we may have a chat with each other, without disturbing any one else. Somehow or other, I feel a

strong conviction that this is the last night that will be spent in the gulch.”

Egbert had thought the same for hours, but he had kept his premonitions to himself, and it cut him to the heart when the gentle and ordinarily light-hearted girl spoke of it in such positive and hopeless tones.

Yet nothing was to be gained by denying the existence of such a desperate strait.

“It does look so, indeed,” he replied, in a low voice, as he leaned against the wagon, in such a posture that his head was brought close to hers. “It is not likely that any diversion will be created in our favor, and we can not keep up a successful resistance much longer. *Our numbers are getting too small.*”

“I hope they will end this struggle by firing into and killing us all together,” returned Lizzie, in her sad, sweet tones, and her heart gave a great throb as she reflected upon the fate of falling into the hands of these tiger-like Comanches. “Do you not think they will do so, Egbert?”

He could not answer in the affirmative, so he did the best thing possible, making answer:

“You know that we shall keep up the fighting as long as any of us are left. When our men become so scarce, or are nearly all gone, the women can take their places, and thus compel the death which I know would be welcome to all.”

“Well, Egbert,” said she, in tones of Christian resignation, “it is only a step between this and the other life. Father and mother and sisters and brothers will mourn when they learn of the death that Lizzie died, but then she has only gone on before—just ahead of them.”

“Yes,” replied the young lover, who felt soothed, albeit saddened, by the words of the sweet girl. Reaching up his hand, he took hers, and with a solemn, sacred feeling, said:

“I suppose, Lizzie, now that we stand in the presence of death, you will permit me to declare how I loved you the first time I saw you in St. Louis, and how that love has increased and deepened with every hour since, until I feel now, like the romantic cavaliers of old, that it is sweet to stand here, and to die, knowing that I die defending your honor and your life. Lizzie, my own dearest one, you have all my heart. None who have seen you can fail to respect your sweetness of character, and the veriest slave was never held a more helpless captive by his taskmaster than I am by you. It would be idle for me to expect anything like a similar emotion upon your part, but I am sure you will not be offended at what I have said. Tell me that.”

“No; I am not—”

Egbert felt her hand tremble in his own, and a strange yearning came over him to hear what she had checked herself in saying. Could it be that she felt in any degree the same emotion that penetrated his whole being? No, impossible; and yet what meant this trembling, this agitation, this excitement?

But she said not the words he was so anxious to hear, and they talked awhile longer upon the desperate situation, and then, kissing the dear hand that he had fondled and held imprisoned in his own, he bade her good-night, and returned to his post of duty.

CHAPTER X.

AT FULL SPEED.

ALL through this singular fight, Lightning Jo had kept within reach of his mustang, which occasionally put in a kick now and then, in the hope that he might be turned to account; but the tumult and uproar became so terrific, that he finally became panic-stricken, and with a whinny of the wildest terror, he made a plunge among the scarcely-less excited animals, when his furious struggles added to the fearful uproar, which was already sufficient to drive an ordinary man out of his senses.

Lightning Jo, as we have said, knew that his friends were coming over the hills at the topmost bent of their speed; but the flight of his horse, and the rapid closing in of the Comanches, made further delay fatal, and with the promptness that was a peculiar characteristic of the man, he grasped his loaded rifle in his hands, and made his desperate struggle for freedom.

This was simply an attempt to dodge beneath the horses’ bellies out beyond them, where he knew his own fleetness could be depended on to carry him safely into the company of his own men.

And now began a most extraordinary performance, and an exhibition of Lightning Jo’s miraculous quickness of movement was given, such as would seem incredible in a description like ours. He was walled in on every hand by the swarming Comanches, but by the matchless use of his tremendous arms, he kept back the scores from entangling him in their embrace; until, all at once, he was seen to make a leap upward, directly over the shoulders of those immediately surrounding, and he shot beneath the belly of the nearest mustang like a whizzing rocket.

And, as he did so, he gave utterance to that strange yell of his, like the yelping prairie-dog, whose bark is cut short, as he plunges headlong into his hole, by the sudden whisking of his head out of sight.

The Comanches who caught the dissolving view of the scout made a desperate struggle to capture him, and those who were still mounted, and saw him leaping beneath their animals, turned them aside, and cut, slashed, and thrust at him in the most spiteful fashion, while others sprang off their horses, and did their utmost to intercept and cut him off, or to trip him to the earth, or to disable him in some way that would prevent his succeeding in his threatened escape from their clutches.

It would be a vain attempt to follow his move-

ments in the way of description, when the eye itself was unable to do so; and, despite the astonishing celerity of the Comanches, whose nimbleness of movement is proverbial in the West, they were completely baffled in every effort they made to entrap him.

Here, there, everywhere, he was seen, shooting out sometimes from between a horse’s legs, and then was in another place before the animal could resent the shock given him—in front—in the rear—leaping to one side—backward—forward—and threw the whole troop into confusion—every now and then giving utterance to that indescribable yell, so that the red-skins were actually in chase of that—and all the time steadily approaching the outer circle of mustangs, and ever keeping in mind the proper direction for him to follow, to meet the much-needed soldiers.

And all this took place in one-tenth the time required in our references. The bewildering dodging and doubling of Lightning Jo continued until he shot from beneath the last horse, and then with a triumphant screech, he sped away like a terrified antelope.

Hitherto the efforts of the Comanches had been directed toward capturing the redoubtable scout, and they soon dashed their animals after him on a full run, in the hope of riding him down before he could reach the assistance which they knew was so close at hand.

It proved closer indeed than they suspected; for they had hardly started upon the fierce pursuit when a rattling discharge of rifles rose above the din and confusion, just as the whole company of United States cavalry thundered over the ridge, and came down upon them like the sweep of a tornado that carries every thing before it.

There were a few exchanges of shots, and then the Comanches would have excited the admiration of a troop of Centaurs by their display of horsemanship. Speeding forward like a whirlwind, the shock of the opposing bodies seemed certain to be like that of an earthquake; but, at the very instant of striking, every Indian shied off, either to the right or the left, and by a quick, rapid circle of their well-trained animals, they shot away beyond reach of harm from the cavalry, and skinned away over the hills and ridges, disappearing from view with the same astonishing quickness, that made successful pursuit out of the question.

Driven away in this unceremonious fashion, the Comanches were compelled to leave their dead upon the field—the wounded managing to take care of themselves, and to get out of harm’s way, ere the cavalry could swoop down upon them. The fashion of giving quarter, in the contests between the Indians and white men, has never been very popular, and at the present day, it may be considered practically obsolete, so that the Comanches displayed only ordinary discretion in “getting up and getting”—if we may be permitted to use the expressive language of the West itself, in referring to an engagement of this kind.

Accustomed as were these men to the exhibitions of the wonderful powers of Lightning Jo, they were astounded at the exhibition of their own eyes, of the deeds he had done during the few minutes that he had engaged in the encounter with the red-skins. The troop gathered around the battle-field, and were commenting in their characteristic manner upon his exploits, when the scout himself, seeing his mustang near at hand, made haste to secure him, and leaping upon his back, he lost no time in placing himself at their lead, and turning his face toward Dead Man’s gulch, he said, in his sharp, peremptory way, when thoroughly in earnest:

“Come, boys, we have lost too much time. We must git there afore dark, if we git there at all.”

Gibbons, the messenger, placed himself beside him, and, as soon as they were fairly under way, Jo remarked to him:

“I hardly know what to make of it. Old Swico is not with them si. unks, and I am disappointed. It has a bad look.”

“Why so?” inquired his comrade, who was partly prepared for the answer.

“I ain’t sartin—but it looks to me as if the *business is finished down at the gulch.*”

“Then why should not the chief, released from there, be here with his men?” continued Gibbons.

“This is only a part of his men; there wa’n’t many Comanches among the hills. I think the old dog sent them off on purpose to bother us and keep us back as much as they could.”

“While Swico and the others have taken another direction?”

“Exactly, and carried the women and children with them, and if so, we might as well turn back to Fort Adams ag’in.”

But the scout, as he uttered these chilling words, set his teeth, and rode his mustang harder than ever toward Dead Man’s Gulch.

CHAPTER XI.

THE VALLEY OF DEATH.

THE wagon containing the females and the children was that which carried the provisions—the others being piled up with the luggage belonging to the different members of the party, and which they had formed into rude barricades from which they fired out, with such deadly effect, upon the Comanches, who, from the nature of the case, were unable to make any kind of approach without exposing themselves to that same unerring fire.

One of the men, at stated periods, visited the provision wagon, and brought forth lunch for his comrades, who felt no suffering in that respect—their great trial being the lack of water. But for the providential supply soon

the whites to hold out longer than the beginning of this terrible, and what was destined to prove the last, day—the one following the departure of Gibbons the messenger, for Fort Adams.

It should be made clear at this point also that, of the half dozen women, and the same number of children, not one had husband, or father, or blood-relative among the defenders, so that, while their situation could scarcely have been more trying, it was deprived of the poignant anguish of seeing the members of their own household shot down in cold blood before their eyes.

No pen can depict the gratitude and love they felt for these men, who, it may be said, were giving up their lives to protect them; for, at the first appearance of the dreaded Comanches, every one of them could have secured their safety by dashing away at full speed upon their fleet-footed mustangs, and leaving the helpless ones to their fate.

But of such a fashion is not the Western borderer, who will go to certain death, rather than prove false to those who have been intrusted to his care. The party had been sent to St. Louis, under an agreement to bring this little company to their homes in Santa Fe, on their return from an excursion to the Eastern States, and there was not one of them who would have dared to ride into the beautiful Mexican town with the tidings that they had perished, and he had lived to tell the tale. Far better, a thousand times, that their bones should be left to bleach upon the prairie, rather than they should live to be forever disgraced and dishonored, and to carry an accusing conscience with them for the remainder of their days.

The children, during the first twenty-four hours, probably suffered the most, in their cramped, constrained position, being compelled to remain within the wagon, lest, if they exposed themselves by appearing upon the ground, they should be slain by the Comanches, who availed themselves of every opportunity to retaliate upon the whites.

After it became pretty certain that Jim Gibbons had penetrated and passed through the Comanche lines, Captain Shields prepared for a deadly charge from their enemies, and from his place in his vehicle he called to the others to make ready also.

The men thus talked with each other, while their faces were mutually invisible; but the little circle permitted the freest intercommunication. His advice was followed, and every rifle loaded and kept ready to be discharged at an instant's warning.

It was terribly annoying to feel, at a juncture like this, that they must husband their fire on account of the failing supply of ammunition, and at the same time manage the business in such a way that the Comanches themselves should not be permitted to discover the appalling truth.

"Don't fire too often," cried the captain, in his cautious way, "and when you do, make sure that you let daylight through one of the red devils. I think they will open on us in some way, and very soon, too."

It seemed strange that the uproar and tumult which had marked the flight of Gibbons should be succeeded in its turn by such a profound silence as now rested upon the gulch. From the place where our friends crouched not a single Comanche could be seen, nor could their location be detected by the slightest sound.

From far away on the prairie came the faint sound of a rifle—but in the immediate vicinity all was still.

Captain Shields was of the opinion that Swico, the chief, had gathered his warriors around him, just outside the gulch, and was holding a consultation as to what was the best to be done, as it was now as good as certain that, before the dawn of another day, a heavy force of cavalry would be down upon them.

There were some who really believed that the Comanches would now draw off and disappear altogether from the place where they had suffered such a terrible repulse; but for this very reason the experienced frontiersman, Captain Shields, was certain that the contrary would prove to be the case. The incitement of revenge would prompt them rather to make the most desperate charges and the most furious assaults upon the little Spartan band.

And while the old hunter lay upon his face in the wagon, stealthily peering out, and listening for the first approach of his foes, he coolly calculated the chances of the day.

"Six of us left, and we average three rifles apiece—to say nothing of revolvers that are scattered all among the boys. We can load and fire these, perhaps four or five times apiece—not oftener, certainly—that is, if we can only get the opportunity to load and fire them. After that—Well, everybody has got to die sometime."

At this he stealthily moved around, and peered out at the wagon containing the helpless ones, and he muttered:

"All seems to be quiet there, and I guess none of them have been reached by these bullets whizzing all about them, which may be either good or bad fortune."

Then as he resumed his position of guard, he cleared his vision with his hand, and added:

"It's mighty rough on them. We men are always expecting such things, and are sort of ready for it; but for helpless women and children—Helloa! what in the name of Heaven can that be?"

CHAPTER XII.

"WHAT IS IT?"

CAPTAIN SHIELDS might well give utterance to this exclamation, for just then his eyes were greeted with the most singular sight he had ever seen in all his life. He rubbed his eyes and stared, and finally

turned to young Egbert Rodman, who just then crawled into the wagon.

"If I was a drinking man," said he, "I would swear that I had the jin-jams sure. Look out the wagon, Rodman, and tell me whether you see anything unusual or different from what we have been accustomed to look upon for the last day or two."

The young man did as requested, and the exclamation that escaped him convinced the nervous officer that his head was still level, and his brain was playing no fantastic freaks with him.

The sight which greeted their eyes, and so excited their wonder, came first in the shape of a horse, which, walking slowly forward, steadily loomed up to view, until it stood directly on the border of the gulch, where, at a hundred yards distant, and with the clear sunlight bathing him, every outline was distinctly visible.

But it was not the horse, but that which was upon it, that so excited the wonder and speculations of those who saw him. Close scrutiny gave it the appearance of an animal standing upon all-fours upon the back of the horse, like Barnum's trained goat Alexis. It was, however, three times the size of that sagacious creature, and an Indian blanket was thrown over it, so that little more than the general outlines could be discerned.

This enveloping blanket reached to the neck of the "what is it?" leaving the head entirely exposed. This was round, and bullet-shaped, and moved in that restless, nervous way peculiar to animals. It seemed as black as coal, and resembled the head of one of those giant gorillas which Du Chaillu ran against in the wilds of Central Africa.

A strange chill crept over the two men, as they felt that this animal was looking steadily down upon the encampment, as if meditating a charge upon it, and only waiting to select the most vulnerable point.

The steed supporting this nondescript stood neither directly facing nor broadside toward the whites—but in such a position that their view could not have been better. The horse remained as stationary and motionless as if he were an image carved in bronze.

No other living creature being in sight, the eyes of the little band of defenders in Dead Man's Gulch were speedily fixed upon this strange phenomenon, and its movements were watched with an intensity of interest which it would be hard to describe.

"It is some Comanche devilry," was the remark of Egbert Rodman, after he had surveyed the object for several minutes. "They have grown tired of running against our bullets, and are about to try some other means."

"But what sort of means is that?" asked the captain, who beyond question was a little nervous over what he saw.

"That is rather hard to tell, until we have some more developments; but you know that the redskins, from their earliest history, have been noted for their ingenious tricks, by which they have outwitted their foes, and you may depend upon it that this is one of their contrivances, although I must say that I do not see the necessity for any such labored attempts as that, when they have every thing their own way; and, if they would only make a united and determined charge, we should all go under to a dead certainty."

Captain Shields, however, like many of the bravest men, was superstitious, and he was inclined to believe that there was something supernatural in the appearance of this thing, and, although he hesitated to say so, yet he looked upon it as having a most direful significance concerning himself and his friends.

Still the horse remained perfectly motionless, and the quadruped, with the blanket thrown over his back, was steadily gazing down upon them, from his perch upon the back of another quadruped.

The profound stillness that then reigned over the prairie and in Dead Man's Gulch was rather deepened by the sound of the faintest, most distant report of a gun that seemed to have come from some point miles and miles away, in the direction of Fort Adams, proving plainly that the pursuit of the flying messenger was not yet given over.

Egbert Rodman concluded that there was a very easy and speedy way of settling the business of convincing the awed captain that there was nothing possessed by this curious animal that was not the common possession of his race. As he stood, partly turned toward him, he could not have desired a better target for a carefully-aimed rifle, and he determined to tumble him from the back of the horse, and thus put a speedy end to that bugbear of the captain's.

Without saying a word as to his intentions, he carefully thrust the muzzle of his rifle through the aperture in the canvas of the wagon, and sighted at about where he supposed the seat of life to be. He held his aim only long enough to make certain, and then pulled the trigger and looked out to see the "what is it?" pitch to the ground, and reveal his particular identity in his death-struggles before their eyes.

But what did he see? The creature, standing in precisely the same posture, and looking steadily down upon them, as unmoved as though such a thing as a gun had never been invented.

But Egbert, although very much astounded, was not yet prepared to admit that the nondescript was impregnable against a good Springfield rifle, even if those about him were under a superstitious spell.

And so, with the same steadiness of eye and nerve, he reached out and took a second rifle from beside him, and shoved this through the "port-hole."

The same unexceptionable target remained, and he resolved that this time there should be no failure. He was a good marksman, and he made cer-

tain aim, while more than one breathlessly watched the result.

The same as before! Not a sign of the thing being harmed in the least.

"Shoot no more!" said Captain Shields, in an awed voice, "there is nothing mortal about it. It is sent to warn us of what is so close at hand."

CHAPTER XIII.

"THE COMANCHES ARE COMING."

WHEN Egbert Rodman fired and missed the second time at the apparition at the top of the gulch, his emotions were certainly of the most uncomfortable kind.

He was now certain that in both instances he had hit it fairly and plumbly in the very point aimed at, and it was equally certain that he had not harmed it in any way.

The mustang did not stir an inch, nor did any movement upon the part of its strange rider indicate that he or it was sensible of the slightest disturbance from the two bullets that had been aimed at its life. Clearly then it was useless to waste any more precious ammunition upon it, when it was simply throwing it away.

Still Egbert was too intelligent and well educated to share fully the belief of Captain Shields, although he could not avoid a cold chill, as he proceeded to load his two discharged pieces, for, to say the least, it was inexplicable, and no man can feel at ease when face to face with a danger which seems to be invulnerable against effort upon his part.

With the exception of Egbert, the other men believed the same as did their captain, and the vim and spirit that had marked their courageous defense up to this point, now deserted them, as the sad, despairing conviction imparted itself to each, that all hope was now gone, and they had but to wait the coming of inevitable doom.

The mustang with the moveless apparition upon it deepened the spell of terror that rested upon the whites, by starting down the hill in the direction of the encampment. He walked with a slow, deliberate tread, like a war-horse stepping at the funeral of his master, and it may be said that the blood of the staring bordermen froze in terror at the sight.

Undoubtedly their senses would so far have left them, that they either would have dashed out of the gulch, or cowered down in terror behind their barricades, as children frightened at the approach of some hobgoblin.

But this last great calamity was spared them; for, while yet at a considerable distance, the mustang came to a sudden and dead halt, paused a moment, and then, with a snort of alarm, turned about and dashed away at full speed.

The mustang was gone so speedily that there were many who were not aware of the manner in which he had made his exit, and were ready to believe that he had vanished like a vision of the night, a proceeding in perfect keeping with their idea of the phenomenon itself.

The hours dragged wearily by until noon came and passed, and not a sign of an Indian had been seen, nor had the frightful apparition reappeared. When the survivors saw that the sun had really crossed the meridian, there were several who began to feel the faintest revival of hope, while one or two were inclined to believe that the Comanches had withdrawn in a body and would be seen no more, discouraged by the desperate resistance they had encountered, and the escape of a body of cavalry from Fort Adams.

While Egbert Rodman could not share in this belief, yet, to relieve the suspense which oppressed all, he determined to pass outside the encampment and learn whether or not there was any foundation for such belief.

Of course, great risk was incurred by doing this, but all had become used to risks, and he leaped from the wagon and ran at quite a rapid rate up the hill, the entire group watching him with an interest scarcely less than that with which they had scrutinized the approach of the apparition.

The relaxation in the vigilance of the Indians had been taken advantage of by the whites, especially by the women and children, the latter of whom, with the innocence of their age, were running back and forth and frolicking, with as much gayety as if playing upon the green at home, with no thought of death in their minds.

"That chap will never get any sense in his head till it is put there by a bullet," remarked Captain Shields, as he stood attentively watching his young friend, secretly admiring, in spite of his words, the intrepidity which he had displayed from the first.

"Why did you permit him to go?"

"Good heavens! I didn't permit it; the first thing I knew, I seen him jump out of the wagon and start up the hill. Didn't I try to stop him when he was after the red devil with his canteen, and what good did it do?"

"It seems to me that it would be so easy for him to run directly to his death."

"So it would, and for that matter, it would be powerful easy for any of us to do the same; but he's about to the top of the gulch," added the captain, turning away to watch his progress.

Such was the case, and every voice was now hushed, and every eye was fixed upon Rodman, as he slacked his gait, and stooping down, made his way as stealthily to the top of the declivity as the most veteran scout could have done.

When he should reach there and look around, all knew that he would give a signal which, indeed, would be that of life or death to them.

They marked him as he crept on his hands and knees to the very top, and then, removing his cap, peered over. Then he rose partly to his feet and turned his head in different directions, and just as the trem-

bling whites were beginning to take heart again, he suddenly wheeled about, and came running down the gulch like a madman, waving his hand and shouting something to his friends which was incomprehensible from his very excitement.

"Back to the wagon, every one of you!" commanded Captain Shields, turning to the women. "Don't wait a second! That means that the Comanches are coming! To your stations, boys, and let us die like men!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LAST DAY IN DEAD MAN'S GULCH.

ONLY a few seconds and Egbert Rodman was in the middle of the encampment, breathless and wild.

"The whole horde of Indians are coming back!" he called out, as soon as he could frame the words. "They are but a short distance away, and will be here in the next minute!"

The words had scarcely been uttered, when the borders of the gulch were swarming with yelling Comanches. The women had barely time to scramble under shelter, when the red-skins were upon them.

"Fire, as you can load and aim!" called out Captain Shields, while yet his men were leaping to their places. "Don't wait, but let them have it! We may as well die fighting like men!"

Crack! crack! barked the rifles of the scouts, in a regular fusilade among the horsemen, the fatal results being instantly seen, in the Comanches here and there dropping from the backs of their mustangs.

This destructive fire accomplished the best thing possible, in that it prevented the wholesale charge that was so much to be dreaded; as it could not fail to be deadly fatal almost on the instant.

The incessant sleet of bullets sent into the ranks of the red-skins created an unexpected confusion, and just as our friends had reached the last round of their ammunition, they fell back out of range, and dismounting, crept to the edge of the gulch and began firing down upon the encampment, just as the scouts themselves would have done had the position been reversed.

Despite the exaggerated assertion of the startled Egbert, as he dashed into the camp, Captain Shields became well satisfied from the glimpse he had gained, that the Comanche force was divided, and he was now fighting against only a portion of those against whom he had been pitted before, the others, as he rightly suspected, having followed on in pursuit of the flying messenger, and with the purpose of trapping and ambuscading the cavalry that would be sent, in all probability, to the rescue of the little band of whites.

But there was little consolation to be derived from this discovery, as there were certainly over a hundred Comanches at hand, and they unquestionably had the power, when they should choose to put it forth, to crush out of existence himself and every one of his brave men. One single determined charge, a few minutes' appalling conflict around the wagons, and then not a man need be left to tell the awful tale of the last appalling massacre of Dead Man's Gulch.

The red-skins kept up the cautious policy of lying flat upon their faces, just over the edge of the ravine, and aiming deliberately down into the encampment. By this time the canvas of the wagons was riddled, and knowing pretty well at what points to aim, the greatest caution was necessary upon the part of the scouts to escape the bullets that were flying all about them.

Fully a dozen of these merciless wretches directed their exclusive attention to the wagon which they knew contained the helpless members of the party, and such a steady fire was kept upon it that the canvas in a few minutes looked like a sieve, pierced in every part by bullets, many of which imbedded themselves in the impenetrable planks of which the wagon-body was composed.

This was the first time since the opening of this dreadful siege that such a demonstration was made, and the unrelenting malignity which characterized it excited the wonder of the scouts, who believed that the Comanches were so infuriated at the losses already suffered, that some of the survivors who may have lost their closest relatives were bent upon exterminating every one, man, woman and child, without awaiting what might be considered the inevitable capture of the females.

But provision had been made against this very thing from the first. The sides of the vehicle, behind the canvas, had been walled up with packages and bundles, in such a skillful fashion that so long as the little party could be made to keep between them and near the center of the wagon-body, they were as impervious to the rifle-shots as if incased in an ironclad of the navy.

This steady stream of fire from the boundary of the gulch continued until the greater portion of the day had passed. So long as it continued without any concentration upon the part of the Comanches, Captain Shields was satisfied, for nothing short of a cannonade could demolish the barricades that had withstood such a terrific fire for so many hours.

With the sole purpose of preventing any *coup d'état* upon the part of the red-skins, the intrepid captain called to his men to send a shot among them now and then, taking care, however, that in every case the rifleman discharged his gun at a fair target.

These opportunities, fortunately for our friends, were few, and they were thus saved the fatal revelation that could have had but one terrible result upon the part of the valiant defenders.

Captain Shields was thus kept so incessantly employed, both in body and mind, that he had little time in which to think of the apparition, and the ominous warning which he fervently believed it

foreshadowed; but, now and then, in the heat of the conflict, it came to him with its dreadful depression of spirits, and made him sigh and wish that the "last minute" would come and the agony end.

This fearful fire continued until darkness descended upon the prairie, and when the light failed a hull came so sudden as to cause a ringing and peculiar lightness of the head that almost drove away the senses of those that remained.

Captain Shields waited a few minutes, and finding a possibility of this quiet lasting for a short time, he determined to make the round, and exchange a few words with his friends. He was alone in the wagon which he had chosen for his sentry-box, and stealing cautiously out, he hurried across the clearing to that containing the women and children. He found them stunned, paralyzed and nearly dead from the awful ordeal through which they had passed, but a little inquiry proved them all untroubled by the bullets that had been sent so inhumanly after them.

Then he made the rounds of the other vehicles, and a blood-chilling discovery awaited him. Out of the five defenders besides himself, only one, Egbert Rodman, remained alive, the other four having been struck and killed by the balls of the Comanches!

"What is the use?" said the stunned officer, as he took the hand of the young man and helped him out upon the green sward; "we two are the only ones left, and I have fired my last round of ammunition, even to my pistols."

"So have I," returned Egbert; "we may as well go to the women and die defending them. The last moment is at hand."

"It is here!" said Captain Shields, in a clear voice. "Look! there they come!"

As he spoke, he pointed up the sides of the gulch, where, in the dim light of the early night, the horsemen were seen gathering for the final charge. The next moment it came!

CHAPTER XV.

THE RESCUE.

THE next moment a strange, wild yell broke the stillness, or rather sounded above the thunder of the horses' hoofs, and the two men, standing sullenly by the wagon in the center of the encampment, and awaiting their doom, like those who, having done all that was possible, could now do nothing else.

Again that indescribable yell rung out over the prairie, and Captain Shields straightened himself like a flash, and gave a gasp of amazement, if not of terror.

"Did you hear that, Egbert?" he demanded, clutching the arm of the half-stupefied man at his side. "By heavens! they are not Indians, but Lightning Jo, and his men from Fort Adams!"

The next minute the clearing within the encampment was filled by a score of men, who, leaping from their horses, and leaving them outside of the circle of wagons, came rushing in upon the little party from every direction.

"Helloa! here, where are you?" shouted the famous scout; "This ain't a game of hide and seek. Come out and show yourselves."

This was uttered in a cheery, hearty way, but mingled with the voice could have been detected a tone of awe and dread, like one who in reality was afraid to hear the same answer which he had demanded.

"Here we are," replied Captain Shields, as he and Rodman walked forward to meet their deliverers.

"But the rest of you—where are they? Speak quick, old fellow," added Jo, taking the hand of the two, both of whom were his acquaintances; "we are in a hurry, and want to hear all that is to be heard."

"There they are," returned Egbert, pointing to the wagons; "some are beneath them, and some are within them, but every one is dead!"

"What!" exclaimed Lightning Jo; "you had women and children with you—they are not all gone? I heard that Lizzie Manning, the sweetest little girl in Santa Fe, or anywhere else, was with you. Where is she?"

"Oh, she is all right," returned Captain Shields, who had misunderstood the full import of the question; "they are unharmed."

But by this time Gibbons, who knew just where to look for them, called out that they were safe, and he and many of the soldiers gathered about the wagon to congratulate and give them what assistance was in their power.

Their kindnesses were needed, for during the latter portion of this day all had suffered the most agonizing thirst, the scant supply which had been furnished them so unexpectedly lasting them but a short time, and then seeming to intensify that intolerable craving that drives the strongest man mad, until all were overcome by a sort of stupor, in which they were sensible only of dull, yearning pain, that could not be quieted.

Expecting as much, the soldiers were prepared, and more than one canteen of cool, refreshing, delicious and reviving water was offered to the suffering women and children, and almost instantly new life was imparted to all, and they awoke to a realizing sense of their position, and to the fact that they had been rescued.

"Are you there, Lizzie?" asked Lightning Jo, crowding forward, and peering among the group, who were dismounting from the vehicle that had proven such a friendly shelter and fort to them. "Helloa! I see you! Thank the good Lord! I was very much afraid I'd be too late to save your sweet self."

And taking the half-fainting girl in his long, brawny arms, he pressed her to his heart and kissed her cheek, just as affectionately and gratefully as he would have done had she been his only daughter restored to life.

And poor Lizzie, now that she saw that the awful danger had passed, could not prevent her woman's nature from asserting itself. Resting her head upon the bosom of the brave-hearted scout, she could only sob in the utter abandonment of feeling. She knew that so long as Lightning Jo stood near her there was nothing to be feared from any mortal danger that walked this earth; and the tense point to which her mind had been strung for so long a time, now fully reacted, and she became as weak and helpless as the youngest of the children who were beginning to awake from their stupor. And so, without attempting to speak, she simply sobbed, and allowed her friend to support her in his arms.

The rest of the cavalry were not idle. They made a circuit of the wagons, and, as they learned the dreadful truth, something like a heart sickness and awe quieted their boisterous voices, and they conversed in low tones, some muttering curses against the red scourges of the plains, while others expressed their sympathy for the brave men who had perished before relief came.

The life of the soldiers on the frontier is such as to accustom them to the most revolting evidences of the cruelty of the Indians; but there were thoughts that were suggested to the cavalry, by the sight in Dead Man's Gulch, such as did not often come to them.

The long-continued and heroic defense of the little party, the torment of thirst, the vain attacks of the ferocious Comanches, the unflinching bravery of men and women, the steady dropping of the scouts until only ten were left, the total giving out of the ammunition, and then the sullen despair, in which the last defenders awaited the last charge; these pictures came to the minds of the cavalrymen in more vivid colors than they can to the reader who has seen nothing of the wild, daring life of the frontier.

Gibbons quickly told his story to his friends. After the diversion created by Lightning Jo's scrimmage with the Comanches among the hills, he and his men had put their horses to the full run, and reached the neighborhood of Dead Man's Gulch just as the lull in the conflict occurred. It was their purpose to charge down upon the red-skins, and give them a taste of vengeance, such as they had not yet encountered; but the cautious Swico had his scouts out, and the approach of the cavalry was signaled to him while they were yet a long way off.

In the hope of still accomplishing something, the majority of the cavalry started in pursuit of the Comanches, while Lightning Jo and a score of his friends hurried on to Dead Man's Gulch, where the chief interest now lay.

The horses of the soldiers were already exhausted, and they were speedily compelled to return, after having exchanged a few shots with the band of Swico Cheque, as they skurried away in the darkness.

CHAPTER XVI.

HOMeward Bound.

THERE were too many horrors hanging around Dead Man's Gulch for the whites to spend any more time there than was necessary. Several of the wagons were overturned upon each other, and then fired, and by the aid of this huge bonfire, which sent a glow out upon the prairie for miles, like the rays of the Eddystone light-house over the ocean, they set about their work of mercy.

In one of the wagons were placed all the bodies of those who had fallen, and the other was fitted up in the most comfortable manner for the women and children. To these several of the cavalry attached their horses, and making sure that everything that could be of any possible use to the Comanches was burned, the rescuing party started out of the ravine, which was ever afterward to cause a shudder whenever memory recalled the awful experiences to which they were there doomed.

The moon had only fairly risen when the procession slowly wended its way out from the gulch, and off across the prairie, in the direction of Fort Adams. They were indeed what they looked to be, a funeral procession, and another vivid comment upon the terrible error which have governed the associations of the white and red-men from the very first meeting, nearly four hundred years ago.

The dragging of the two heavily-laden wagons across the prairie could but be a tedious and wearisome task, and in all probability would not be completed until the second day after starting. Of course there was a possibility that Swico would return to the attack, if a suitable occasion should offer, but it was not deemed necessary that the entire one hundred men should remain to escort them into the fort.

And so when the eighty rode back from the fruitless pursuit of the main body of Indians, the arrangements were made for dividing the company, it being well known that Colonel Greaves could ill afford to spare so many men, and would be pleased if such a course could be carried out without any ill results flowing therefrom.

But, first of all, the steeds and their riders needed rest after the tremendous charge over the prairie, and less than a mile from Dead Man's Gulch, where a sparkling stream of cold water wandered through a grove of trees, the camp was made for the night, the sentinels being stationed at every point, and such precautions made, as to cause every one to feel perfectly safe against any disturbance from the malignant red-skins, who had too much discretion to rush in where they knew they would be only too gladly received by the cavalry.

Several fires were kindled in the grove, and food cooked, the camping-ground being one of the most pleasant that could possibly have been chosen, as

there was an abundance of rich grass for their animals, and everything that could be needed by their riders.

At one of these fires, a little apart from the rest, were three persons, engaged in the most pleasant converse. The long, lank figure, stretched lazily upon the ground, supporting himself upon his elbow, was Lightning Jo, at his ease, with his nature all "unbent," and his humorous self at the surface. As he talked, his black eyes sparkled, and his handsome white teeth were constantly exposed as he asked some question, or made some reply to Egbert Rodman and Lizzie Manning, who were seated upon the opposite side of the fire, rather closer together than was absolutely necessary, chatting with each other and with the scout, who kept "chaffing" them so continuously that they had little opportunity for any private conference of their own.

"You may as well wait, youngers," said Jo. "I don't object to you squeezing each other's hands, jest as you tried a minute ago, when you thought I warn't looking; but you needn't try to talk to each other when I'm about. So wait, I tell yer, till some other time, for you ain't going to get rid of me till you bunk up for the night."

"No one wants to get rid of you," retorted Lizzie, as a blush suffused her face, and her eyes sparkle in the firelight. "What do we care for you? I have no wish for any private talk with Egbert."

"Of course not; nor he with you; any fool can see that in both your looks, 'specially in his. But that's always the way. I had an aunt once that always was interfering when any young dunces got to fooling round. She had a son that she thought all the world of. He had learned the shoemaker's trade, and when he was about forty or forty-five, he got tender on a cross-eyed girl, with red hair, that lived near him, and he went for her. My aunt didn't like it a bit, and done all she could to break it up. She said if her boy would wait till he got to be a man, she wouldn't object, if he would pick out a young lady for her worth instead of for her beauty, as he had done. She done everything to torment the poor feller, giving him medicine to make him sick when he had a special appointment with her, sewing big patches all over his coat, so that he was ashamed to wear it, and locking him in his room and giving him a good strapping when he got sassy and gave her any of his lip."

Cousin Josh didn't mind that much, as he said the old woman had been a little peculiar ever since he had been 'quainted with her; but there was one thing that he couldn't get used to, and that was her way of bouncing upon him and his señorita, just as they were beginning to act like you two folks, and thought nobody wasn't looking on. Three times, Josh told me, he had got down on his knees and clasped his hands and shut his eyes, and was making his proposal to his lady, and was just in the sweetest part, when he opened his eyes and saw his mother standing afore him with a sweet smile upon her countenance, and more than once, when he reached out his arm to put around the young lady's waist, it went over the old woman's neck, who was a-listening near, and who cuffed his ears for being such a fool.

"Josh stood it as long as he could, but finally he got even with her."

"In what way?" inquired Egbert.

"He got a big skyrocket made, and fastened it to the old lady's dress, and got a little boy to touch off the fuse. The last seen of my aunt she was whizzing and bobbing through the air, until she went out of sight. As she never came down ag'in, Josh wasn't bothered any more, and he went on with his courtship and at last he got married and lived happy, as such a good boy deserved to be."

CHAPTER XVII.

ON THE BRINK.

THE sentinels on duty at the grove detected more than once through the night the Comanches prowling around the encampment; but they evidently saw enough to convince them that it wouldn't pay to disturb the sleepers, and so they slept on, on, till the bright summer sun pierced the camp, and all was active again. Then, as the preparations were made for resuming the journey to Fort Adams, and a careful reconnaissance of the surrounding prairie was made, not a shadow of a red-skin could be seen.

"I was in hopes that I could get a crack at Swico," remarked Lightning Jo, as he rode at the head of the company with Egbert Rodman and Lizzie Manning by his side, he insisting upon her keeping him company when no danger was thereby incurred, as he declared there was no telling when such an opportunity would be given him again, and, as a matter of course, she was only too happy to comply with his wishes.

"I was saying that I had hopes of getting even with Swico, and he and me have an account that must be squared one of these days, but I wasn't given the chance to draw a bead on his shadow. Howsumever, we'll get square one of these days, as my uncle used to remark when he cheated me out of my last cent, and then kicked me out doors when I asked him for a trifle. They've got some purty big devils among the Comanches, but I think Swico goes ahead of 'em all. Do you know what sort of ornament he has made for himself, and which he thinks more of than any thing he ever had?"

The two replied that they had never heard mention of it.

"He wears a shirt of buck-skin, made without the usual ornaments of beads and porcupine-quills, but hung with a full, long fringe formed from the hair of white women and children? You needn't look so horrified," the scout hastened to add, as he noted the expression upon the faces of his friends. "I've

sent word to Swico that him and me could never square accounts till I got hold of that same thing, and I never can get hold of it till I wipe the owner out, so you can see how that thing has got to be settled between us."

"And if you hadn't come to Dead Man's Gulch as you did, that fringe would have been ornamented with my tresses," said Lizzie, looking with an awed, grateful look at her preserver.

"I s'pose," was the matter-of-fact reply, "the old scamp was expecting me, and I wonder that he waited. But he sloped when some of his scouts sent him word that we was coming. Howsumever, what's the use of talking? I don't see as you've got any reason to think any thing about him."

"Where do you suppose this Comanche chief and his band are now?" inquired Egbert.

"Off over the prairie somewhere, looking for more women and children. That's his *forte*, as they say down in Santa Fe, and I rather reckon that there are plenty more in the same boat with him."

The subject, at the present time, seemed distasteful to Lightning Jo. The fight was over, and he considered all danger at an end, and despite the bier, with its awful load, that followed in the rear of the cavalcade, he seemed to feel a certain buoyancy of spirits that was constantly struggling for expression in his words and manner.

The morning was clear and bracing, and but for the lumbering wagons the whole party would have been bounding forward at a rate that would have carried them to Fort Adams within the next few hours.

No interruption occurred until noon, when a halt was made for dinner, the cavalry being provided with sufficient rations to make it unnecessary to use the rifle in quest of game.

By the middle of the afternoon they were within a dozen miles of the fort; and, as there had been no signs of Indians visible since starting in the morning, it was concluded to be no violation of prudence for the main body to gallop on to their destination, leaving the wagons to follow at their leisure, it being confidently expected that they would come into the stockade shortly after nightfall.

Lightning Jo and a dozen of the best men, including Gibbons, Captain Shields and Rodman, remained with the smaller party. All were mounted, fully armed and provided with an abundance of ammunition, so that no one felt any misgiving as to the result of this proceeding, which at first sight might seem imprudent in the highest degree. In case any formidable body of Indians should put in an appearance, and it was deemed best to avoid a fight, the wagons could be abandoned, and the women and children taken upon the horses with the men, and the fight would be as rapid and sure as could be desired.

Nothing but the sternest necessity could induce Lightning Jo and his party to abandon their dead friends to mutilation and outrage at the hands of the Comanches; but they deemed that necessity so remote as scarcely to require a thought, and so they separated, and the main body rapidly vanished from view.

A few miles further on the prairie was broken up in ridges and hills of such size as to merit the name of mountains, and Jo declared that several miles could be saved by passing through these. He had done so several times, and knew of a pass through which the wagons could be drawn with as much ease as upon the open plain.

Before entering this, however, he displayed his usual caution by galloping ahead and making a reconnaissance, from which he returned with the announcement that nothing in the shape of Indians was to be feared.

"There seems to be a heavy storm coming," he added, as he glanced up at the darkening sky, "but we can stand that in the mountains as well as upon the prairies; so let's go ahead."

As the little company rode into the ravine, and marked the ominous gathering of the elements, more than one was sensible of a singular depression of spirits—a strange, chilling foreboding such as sometimes comes over us when standing beneath some impending calamity.

And, indeed, had Lightning Jo suspected the appalling danger which was already gathering over his brave band, he would have gone a thousand miles before venturing a rod into that ravine!

CHAPTER XVIII.

SHUT IN.

THE little party of horsemen had scarcely begun their passage through the hills, when it became evident that they were to encounter the storm of which Lightning Jo had spoken. The warm air became of chilly coldness, and blew in fitful gusts against their faces, the sky was rapidly overcast by dark, sweeping clouds, and the rumbling thunder approached higher and higher, rolling up from the horizon like the "chariot-wheels over the court of heaven," while the forked lightning darted in and out from the inky masses, like streams of blood. A few screeching birds went skurrying away in a cloud of dust, and the appearance of every thing left no doubt of the elemental tumult that was on the eve of breaking forth.

"We're going to catch it, you bet!" remarked Jo, as he looked up at the marshaling of Nature's forces, clapping his hands to the top of his head, as if fearful that his cap would be whirled out of sight by the tornado-like gust of wind, "but it would be worse out on the prairie than down here."

He had to shout to make himself heard, although the lovers, Egbert and Lizzie, were riding close to him.

The former shouted back the return in the question:

"Can we not find shelter before the storm comes?

We shall all be drenched to the skin, if we are exposed to the deluge for the space of five minutes."

"Certainly, we can find shelter, and that's just what I'm going for this minute. We'll make it afore the deluge comes. If we'd been on the prairie we'd had to hold our hair on, and we'd have got such a basting that it would have taken a lifetime to git over it."

"Couldn't we have found shelter in the wagons?" yelled Egbert.

Jo's face could be seen to expand in a grin, as he made answer in the same vociferous tone:

"Shelter in the wagons? I've seen that tried afore—when the covering was slathered to ribbons in the wint of an eye and the wagons went over and over rolling like a log, going down the side of a mountain till they went out of sight, and when we rid our horses long over that same route, we made our camp-fires with bits of wagon for the next fifty miles. I reckon you haven't had a storm sin' you left St. Louey?"

"Certainly nothing like *that*," was the answer of Rodman, who thought the scout was drawing things with rather a "long bow."

"We had several storms, such as struck us all as being very severe."

"S'pose you thought so; but they were the gentlest of zephyrs alongside of some that I've butted ag'in'. I came over the plains with a party in '48, when I was purty young, and took my first degree in prairie storms then. We were 'bout a hundred miles out of St. Louey, when we butted ag'in' a dead high-wind, that got so strong that we see'd purty soon we shouldn't be able to stand. When I see'd how things was going, and that my hoss was a-slipping backward, I jumped off my hoss, and laid down flat on my face and held onto the ground; but it wa'n't no use. I see'd my animal going end over end over the plain, looking like a dough-nut turning summersets, and, finding I was blowing loose, I crawled into the wagon in the tallest kind of a hurry."

"And there you were safe," remarked Egbert, knowing that something stunning was at hand.

"Yes, I rather think we was," he answered, ironically. "When I crawled into the ox-wagon, I found all the rest war there, and the old shebang was already going backward, and gaining every second like a steam-engine. You see the wind was dead ahead, and the cover of the wagon acted like a sail, and it warn't long afore we was a-going over the prairie at a rate that you never dreamed of. You can just bet things hummed. I looked out of the side of the coach, and see'd the wagon-wheels going round so fast that you couldn't see anything but the hubs, and they had a misty sort of look, from buzzing round in such style. Some of the women got a little nervous, and said they preferred to ride at a little slower gait, and axed me, if it was all the same to me, if I wouldn't shut off a little steam. All I could do was to put on the brakes, and the minute I done that, I see'd a flash and they was gone!—jist like a pinch of powder—burned up by the friction."

"So I told the folks to compose themselves, as I reckoned we war in for it, and we'd all go to pieces together. Well, now, that shebang kept going faster and faster. I jist tell you things buzzed for awhile. I looked out the tail of the wagon (we war going tail foremost) and see'd ourselves going right straight for Devil's Humps—which you know is two mountain peaks, something like a quarter of a mile apart. Thinking every thing was up, I jist scroched down in the wagon and watched to see ourselves go. I s'pose you will think I'm exaggerating, when I tell you we went right up the first mountain-peak, which was half a mile high, as quick as a wink, but there the wagon struck a rock, turned summersets; but it was going so fast that it shot right across from one peak to another, and happening to light right side up, we kept straight on for St. Louey. That 'ere jump from one mount to another rather mixed us up, and some of the women complained of being jarred a little.

Howsumever, we got straightened up after a bit, and then begun to watch things. I knowed there was fun ahead, when I see'd a thundering big drove of cattle right in our path. They tried to get out of our way, but they couldn't, and we went right through them like a cannon-shot, and when I looked back I see'd a regular tunnel through the drove of buffers knocked to flinders. You see there was several purty good-sized streams in our way, and when we buzzed through them, some of us got our clothes a little moist, but we had to let things go, and to make a long story short, we never held in until we reached St. Louey, where we shot straight through the biggest hotel, and into an old lady's cellar afore we stopped.

"Of course we was a little shook up, but that was nothing to what we met next day—"

Lightning Jo suddenly paused, in the very middle of the sentence, and his companions saw his face blanch, and his eyes flash, as though he had caught sight of some new and appalling danger.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TERROR OF THE PRAIRIE.

THERE was no need of Lightning Jo telling what it was that so startled him, for following the direction of his own gaze, every eye saw it on the instant.

On the upper margin of the precipitous chasm or cañon, through which they were making their way, at a point about a hundred feet above and directly over them, was the apparition which had so startled Captain Shields when in Dead Man's Gulch. The mustang was standing as motionless as then, and the same quadruped nondescript was perched upon his back, its black head turned a little to one side, while it was evidently gazing down upon them with a fixed, intense stare.

"The devil will be to pay now," growled Jo, just loud enough to be heard in the roaring wind; "but it's too late to put back, and we'll press ahead."

And resolutely compressing his lips, he drove his mustang to the head of the cavalcade and forced him into a gallop along the cañon, the others, of course, following his example.

Neither Egbert nor Lizzie had made the least reference to this apparition, while in converse with the scout, for the reason that each knew he bore the reputation of being a practical man, and would only laugh and tell them that it was a "spook," that their fright and sufferings caused to appear to their own minds—an explanation both were inclined to accept up to this point.

But Jo had scarcely started ahead, when several large drops of rain pattering here and there in the gorge, warned them that the threatening deluge was at hand. The winding of the cañon, at the point over which they were now hurrying, was such that there was comparatively little wind about them, although it moaned and sobbed over their heads like the desolate wailing of lost spirits.

"Hurry up, Jo!" yelled Gibbons, from directly in the rear of the livers, "or we shall be drenched!"

No need of shouting to the scout, who at that moment made a dash a little to one side, and then wheeling his steed squarely about, halted and motioned to the others to join him on the instant.

The shelter was reached.

The horse of the scout stood on the same level with the bottom of the cañon; but the rocky side of the latter, instead of sloping perpendicularly upward, inclined far out over their heads, so that the upper margin projected fully twenty feet further over than did the base, thus giving them the very protection for which they were so hastily seeking.

The party lost no time in arranging themselves beneath this roof, and in a few minutes the two wagons came lumbering up, the horses forced to a much more rapid gait than they had yet attempted.

They had barely time to reach the spot, when the bullet-like drops that had been pattering faster and faster, suddenly and prodigiously increased, and the storm broke forth.

The scene was fearfully sublime—and such as our pen scarcely dare attempt to depict. The rain came down in such blinding torrents that the top of the gorge was shut out from the view of the whites, and a dim, watery twilight gloom enveloped them all. The thunder, that had been somewhat diminishing for the last few minutes, now burst forth in rattling, tremendous discharges, as if heaven and earth were coming together—while the vivid, intense lightning seemed to be everywhere—rending rocks and trees, and playing along the cañon in its arrowy flight, setting the whole air afire.

All stood awed and hushed—no one daring to break the stillness, and scarcely moving during this war of the elements. It seemed as if it were blasphemy for man to speak or interpose during the moments when Nature herself was speaking in such trumpet-tones.

But the storm was as short as it was violent; and as the booming thunder retreated and gradually died away, in sullen reverberations, the fall of rain slackened, and just as the afternoon was drawing to a close, the last drop fell.

The appearance of the mustang and its strange rider seemed to have produced a remarkable effect upon Lightning Jo, who had lost all his vivacity and humor, and was thoughtful and silent.

"Are we to remain here all night or go forward?" asked Egbert, walking to where Jo stood, leaning against the rocks, with arms folded and moody brow.

"Go forward," he replied, almost savagely, as he raised himself. "What do we want to stay here for?"

"I see it is nearly dark, and Fort Adams is still a number of miles away. We shall not be able to reach there until far into the night. Why not encamp where we are, and finish the journey leisurely in the morning? There seems to be no particular danger."

"I tell you there *is* danger," was the fierce reply of the scout; "did you see that *thing* on the mustang?"

"Yes; and I have seen it before."

"And so have I, and I can tell you it means something. When that comes 'round, there's the worst kind of deviltry close onto its heels; you can bet on that."

"Then we are not yet through with the Indians, after believing we were perfectly clear of them."

"I didn't say that—but what I mean is that some deviltry is brewing; we're right in the middle of these hills, and the best thing we can do is to get ahead while we can."

"Hush!" exclaimed Lizzie Manning, in an awed voice; "what is the meaning of *that*?"

his words and actions with an intensity of anxiety that can scarcely be described.

The roar, which now drowned every other sound, was like that made by the approaching train, and it had that awful element of terror which comes over one when he feels that a peril is bearing swiftly down upon him from which there is no escape.

"Onto your horses, every one of you! Cut 'em loose from the wagons, and don't wait a minute!"

The voice of Lightning Jo rung out like a trumpet and was obeyed on the instant, while by another imperious command of his, the women and children were taken upon the backs of the animals in front of the hunters.

Quickly as all this was done, it was not a moment too soon. In reply to the questioning looks of his friends, the scout pointed up the ravine in the direction whence they had come.

At first sight, there seemed to be a mass of discolored snow spinning down the cañon; but the next moment all knew that it was the foam and spray of water, rushing down upon them with the impetuosity of a Niagara.

"Hold fast!" called out Jo; "but there's no use trying to fight it!"

Even while the words were in his mouth, the appalling torrent came upon them!

There was a blinding dash of spray and mist, and then every horse, with its rider, was carried as quick as a flash off his feet, and shot down the cañon like a meteor.

Egbert Rodman, the moment he realized the nature of the danger, reached forward and caught the hand of Lizzie Manning, intending to place her upon the horse, in front of him, as many of the other scouts had done; but ere he could accomplish the transfer, the shock was upon them, and in the stunning, bewildering crash, he was only sensible of going forward with tremendous velocity, down the cañon, among his friends, who were all impelled onward by the same irresistible force, that made them, for the time, like bits of driftwood heaped in the vortex of the great maelstrom.

"Lizzie! where are you?" he called out in his agony, groping blindly about him in the tornado of mist, and driftwood, and water; "reach out your hand that I may save you!"

He heard something like an answering cry; but in the rush and whirl, he could not tell the direction nor the point whence it came; and had he known that only a half-dozen feet separated them, it was no more in his power to pass the chasm than it was for him to turn and make headway against the *chute* that was carrying everything before it with an inconceivable velocity.

It would be impossible to describe the appalling scene in the cañon. Those who lived to tell it, in after years, shuddered at its recollection and declared that its terror was greater than any through which they had ever passed. The little group who sat waiting and conversing upon their horses had scarcely been caught up and shot forward, when the gloom of the approaching night deepened to that of the most intense, inky blackness, so that no man, speaking literally, could have seen his hand before his face.

It would have made no difference had it been high noon, so far as the question of helping themselves was concerned, although it might have lessened in some degree that shuddering, shivering dread that possessed all, under the expectation every moment of being dashed to fragments against the projecting rocks, or crushed by the *debris* that was carried tumultuously forward in the rush and whirl of waters.

"Stick to your horses, and take things easy!"

The voice of Lightning Jo seemed to come from a point a thousand yards away—whether above or below could not be told by the sound; but all knew that he was somewhere in the torrent, and there was something reassuring in the sound of his ringing voice in this general pandemonium of disaster and death. It encouraged more than one despairing and helpless, and they clung the more tightly and took some courage and hope.

"Jo, can you hear my voice?" called out Egbert Rodman, with the whole strength of his lungs.

"I reckon so," came back the instant answer.

"Tell me, then, whether you have Lizzie with you, or whether you know where she is."

"No; can't tell; thought you and her were together. We'll fetch up somewhere purty soon—daylight will come in the course of a week—and then we'll hunt for each other. No use till then—so you keep your mouth shet, and look out that you don't get your head cracked."

These seemed heartless words to Egbert; but they were really dictated by prudence and common sense, and he acted upon the advice, so far as it concerned the questioning of the scout.

The mustang of our young friend was swimming as well as he could down the *chute*, striving only to keep himself afloat. His body was beneath the water, his nose and head only appearing above. Up to this time Egbert had maintained his place upon his back, sinking of course to the armpits; but when he heard the warning words of Lightning Jo, he understood how the projecting point of some jagged rock might pass over his animal's head, and crush his own.

Accordingly he quietly slipped back over the animal's haunches, and submerging himself to his ears, held on to the tail of the animal, in a position of greater safety—if such a thing as safety can be named in reference to the party caught by the torrent in the cañon.

Egbert had scarcely adopted this precautionary measure, when he had reason to thank Lightning Jo for the timely warning.

Something grazed the top of his head, like the whiz of a cannon-ball, proving with what amazing velocity he was shooting down the cañon.

"How can any one get out of this horrible place alive?" was the question he asked, as he realized the narrowness of his escape. "We must all be shattered to pieces before going much further. Ah!"

Just then a wild cry rung out above the din and roar of the waters—the cry of a strong man in his last agony. Driven as if by a columbiad against some flinty projection, he had only time to make the shriek as the breath was driven from his body.

As this spinning downward through the chasm continued for several moments, Egbert endeavored to collect his senses and to think more clearly upon his terrible position.

He was morally certain that a number of the party had already lost their lives, and a twinge of anguish shot through his heart as he reflected upon the females and the tender children exposed to this perilous war of elements. And then, too, the wagon containing the remains of those who had fought so gallantly in Dead Man's Gulch—what a ghastly fate had overtaken them! It seemed, indeed, as if nature had joined with man in heaping unimaginable horrors upon the heads of the weak and defenseless, and that nothing remained but to await shudderingly the fate that could not be postponed much longer.

But amid the rack and turmoil and swirl of the cañon, the thought of his beloved Lizzie Manning would present itself, and he could not help wondering, doubting, fearing and hoping all in the same breath.

Was she living, and had she survived the ordeal uninjured up to this time? Or had her gentle nature succumbed at the first shock? She had proven herself a heroine in Dead Man's Gulch, and was she equal to this? If still living, how much longer could she bear the strain upon her system?

But ere Egbert Rodman could conjecture any replies to these questions, he was called upon to make a still more desperate fight for his own life.

His mustang, encountering some obstruction, made such a sudden, furious plunge, that his tail was drawn from the loose grasp of Egbert, who, aiming to renew it, clutched vaguely in the darkness and was unable to reach his faithful animal. He could hear him floundering and neighing close at hand, but there was no use of attempting to reach him, and he called to the horse, in the hope that he would succeed in making his way to him; but he was disappointed in this also, for the noise of the struggles speedily ceased, and he concluded that the faithful animal was dead.

Rather curiously the young man had clung to his rifle ever since he was caught by the water tornado, and now that he was somewhat cooler and more collected, he resolved that nothing but "death should them part." It was troublesome to swim with it grasped in one hand, but he was quite able to do it, where the current possessed such extraordinary velocity, and he moved forward with little effort on his part.

All this passed in a tenth part of the time taken by us in writing it, and Egbert Rodman had scarcely gained a connected idea of what was going on, when he made the discovery that the channel through which he had been dashed was widening and considerably decreasing. The deafening crash that had been in his ears from the moment he was carried off his feet, now sunk to a dull noise, proving that he had emerged from the cañon, and was floating over what might be termed a lake—caused, undoubtedly, by the widening of the pass through which Lightning Jo had attempted to guide the little party, with its two wagons.

With this discovery of the comparative calmness of the water, came, for the first time, something like returning hope to Egbert Rodman, who, feeling confident that there must be a tenable foothold at no great distance, began swimming forward regularly, so as to avoid being carried around in a circle.

Of course such a basin as this must have an outlet as well as an inlet, and it was his purpose to prevent himself being carried away into another similar cañon, from which it was hardly possible to make such an escape over again.

This required severe effort, but happily it was accomplished sooner than was expected. While swimming vigorously forward, his feet touched bottom, and although scarcely able to maintain his foothold, yet by using arms and legs and grasping some branches that brushed his face, he succeeded in drawing himself out upon land, and found himself free from the flood.

"Saved at last, and thank God for it!" was his fervent ejaculation. "But what of the rest?—what of the women and children? and Lizzie—where can she be?"

All was of inky darkness about him, and he hardly dared to move for fear of plunging himself into some inextricable pitfall. Only by feeling every foot of the way as he advanced, did he manage to get away from the immediate neighborhood of the din and rush of waters.

Sinking down upon his knees, he crept along for some distance in this manner, until, as near as he could judge, he was in a sort of valley or ravine, much broader than the one in which he and his friends had been overwhelmed by the flood, and which seemed to have escaped the rush of water that had been driven through that.

Finding that it remained comparatively level, he finally rose to his feet again and advanced with more speed, but at the same time, with the caution due such a critical situation.

The wind was still blowing with a desolate, wailing sound, but the rain had ceased entirely; and the night, pitchy dark and cold, could not have been more desolate and cheerless.

"Halloa!" suddenly exclaimed the astonished Egbert, "yonder is a light as sure as the world!"

Who can be camping out to night? Be it friend or foe, I must find out.

With this resolution he started toward the star-like beacon.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LONELY CAMP-FIRE.

The twinkling light of a camp-fire at such a time as this, and in such a place, was enough to make any one cautious, and Egbert Rodman approached it as stealthily as a Comanche would have done himself.

He was somewhat surprised when yet some distance away to observe that there was a single person sitting near it, in the attitude either of deep meditation or intense listening.

"There must be others close at hand, or else he is not aware of the danger he runs," muttered the young man, as he continued his advance. "Strange, but there is something about him that reminds me of Lightning Jo; and," he added, the next moment, "Lightning Jo it is; helloa! old fellow, how came you here?"

And forgetful of all else for the time, except his delight in seeing the true and tried comrade, Egbert Rodman rushed forward to give him appropriate greeting.

He saw at once that something was the matter with the scout. He was sitting upon a large stone, with his rifle between his knees, and supporting his chin, was looking absently into the fire, like one whose thoughts were entirely removed from his present surroundings. He merely looked up from the spontaneous greeting of the young friend from whom he had become separated some time before, and staring at him for a moment again lowered his gaze without saying a word or shifting his position.

But, if he was in a sullen, thoughtful mood, Egbert was not, nor did he intend to keep any prolonged silence in deference to such a whim. He believed he understood the scout well enough to know how to approach him, and in a cheery manner, free from any rude familiarity, he placed himself beside him, and touching his shoulder, said:

"Come, Jo, don't sit idle here. You seem to be depressed; but rally, and tell me what the matter is."

The scout seemed to appreciate the consideration shown him, and straightening up, he heaved a great sigh, looked fixedly at his young friend again, but still refused to speak. Egbert was determined to press the matter.

"What is it that troubles you, Jo? Come, out with it; what are you thinking about?"

"Little Lizzie Manning!" was the reply of the scout, in a voice that was sepulchral in its solemnity.

The shaft of a Comanche's poisoned arrow, driven to the heart of Egbert Rodman, could not have startled him more than did this reply. He gave a gasp as if of pain, and almost fell to the earth before he could compose himself sufficiently to sit down and collect his thoughts. When he did so he looked across the opposite side of the camp-fire, and asked, pleadingly:

"What about her, Jo? Is she living or dead? Can you tell me what has become of her? Don't keep me in suspense!"

"You didn't seem in quite so much suspense a little while ago," he remarked, somewhat resentfully; and then, as if regretting the words, he hastened to add, in more considerate voice:

"That's just the trouble, Roddy; you know when the fresh came we hadn't any time to look after each other, but we went spinning down the canyon as if Old Nick was arter us. I heerd you yell, and of course you heerd my answer, but there wasn't much to be seen then, and so we each kept on sailing on our own hook."

"But Lizzie! Did you hear nothing of her?" inquired the breathless lover.

"Yes; I did hear her," replied Jo, with another sigh; "some time arter that I heerd her call out somebody's name."

"Whose was it?" asked Egbert, with a painful throb of the heart, and a staring, eager look that brought a wan smile to the face of Jo for the instant, but passing instantly as he made answer:

"As near as I could make out, it was yours. In course you didn't hear it, but as I did I called back to her, and she know'd me on the instant. I axed her how she was fixed, and she said she was on the back of her horse, but had no idea where she was going, or how it was possible for her to get out of this scrape. You can understand that it wasn't very easy to gabble at such a time, with the roar of the canyon in your ears. I told her to hang on to her hoss, no matter where he went, and there was a chance of her getting through somewhere. At the same time I didn't think there was much chance of any one ever coming out of that place alive. I could tell by the sound of the gal's voice that she wasn't very far away, and I worked as never a poor wretch worked before to get to her. I tired my hoss out, and when we got down to that 'ere lake, or whatever you're a mind to call it, I struck out for myself. The minute I left the mustang I sung out to her, but I didn't hear any answer. I yelled ag'in and ag'in, but it warn't no use, and I swum ashore and made up my mind—well, no—confound it," added the scout, fretfully, "I haven't made up my mind, either, that the little gal has been drowned, and we ain't never more to hear her sweet voice. That's what I've been feeling, and what I was thinking about when you come sneaking up so sly that you thought nobody could hear you."

"You think, then, that there is a possibility that she may have escaped, after all?"

"Well, there's the trouble," returned Lightning

Jo, with something of his old familiar look. "When I set to thinking about it, I can't see any way under heaven by which she could come out alive, and I s'pose I couldn't have seen any way how you folks were ever to get out of Dead Man's Gulch, if I could have known how things were there. It is mighty hard, and you'd feel it, too, if you thought half as much of that little gal as I do."

Poor Egbert was inexpressibly shocked at this remark, and looked reprovingly at the scout. He made no reply, and assumed a thoughtful attitude at the other side of the camp-fire; but just then the scout roused up.

"Confound it! what's the use! I ain't going to make a fool of myself! This will never do!"

And stretching and yawning, he suddenly raised his voice, and emitted his peculiar yell, that rung among and through the rocks, gorges and ravines with a power that must have carried it a long distance over the prairie.

"What in the name of heaven do you mean by that?" asked the astonished Rodman, suspecting that he was out of his head.

"Some of the poor dogs may have managed to crawl out as did you, and that'll tell them where to look for me. What do you s'pose I kindled this fire for?"

"To dry your clothes and keep the chill off."

"Not a bit of it; the night ain't cold, and there's nothing in damp clothes that you or I need mind. If it hadn't been fur these sticks burning, you'd never have found your way here, and it may do the same for others. No, Roddy," said Jo, in a more natural voice, "we've got nothin' to do but to wait where we are till morning. Then we'll take our reckoning, and make a search for the gal."

"And never give up till we find her, dead or alive," added Egbert, in a low, earnest voice.

"That's the style. I'm with you there. I s'pose you feel a little hungry and tired?"

"I have hardly had time to think of such a thing as hunger, while I have become sensible of the weariness only after seating myself here—wondering all the time how it was you managed to have such a fire in so short a time."

"No trouble 'bout that; you see I come down ahead of all the rest, and I wa'n't in the basin two seconds afore I paddled out. I've been in these hills so often before that I know 'em purty well, but there was a little too much darkness for me to make out where I was. I pitched over a half-dozen precipices something less than a mile high, and finally lit here. It wa'n't any trouble to start a fire, as this rain was a quick and not a soaking one. Falling right on the top of things it floated off, and I found all the dried leaves I wanted; and after they was started the rest was easy enough."

It came out further, that overwhelmingly sudden as was the flood that overtook them in the cañon, it had not found Lightning Jo unprepared. His rifle was securely "corked" at the muzzle, so as to keep out the water, and his ammunition and a quantity of matches were all preserved in water-proof casings, so that, barring the saturation of his garments, he came out of the terrible bath as well as he went in.

True he had parted from his horse, but that cost him scarcely a thought. The mustang was so well trained that if he succeeded in escaping with his own life, he would manage to find his master with little difficulty; and, in case he had perished, there was no dearth of animals in the West, and there was little fear of Lightning Jo suffering long for such a part of his outfit as a horse.

As Egbert saw his companion heap more fuel on the fire, he could not avoid the thought that he was incurring great risk thereby, as both of them were rendered the best of targets for any skulking foe.

There were trees growing around, most of them of a stunted nature—but the light of the fire could be seen for quite a distance through the hills. The night-wind soothed with a dull, desolate wailing, through the branches, and the roar of the cañon sounded distant and faint, growing less every hour, and proving that it was being emptied as rapidly as it was filled.

Finally Egbert Rodman could not forbear asking the question:

"Is there nothing to be feared in the shape of Indians, Jo?"

"No; there's none here, except—except that *Thing* that you saw on his hoss. Didn't I tell you that his coming was to give us notice that something else was coming, and it was on us afore we knew it. It's always so."

"Then you have seen it before?" asked Egbert, who was rather curious to hear what the scout had to say about the creature, which certainly had caused him no little wonderment since he had first set eyes upon it.

"I should think I had," was the reply, in a hurried voice. "It's five years since I first heard of it, though Kit Carson did tell me something about some such thing as that being seen in the Apache country more than ten years ago. But the chap that told me was the only one that was left out of an emigrant party of over twenty. He said it came up to their camp one night just as the sun was setting, and arter looking at them for a few minutes rode away at a gallop, and it wa'n't two hours afore the red-skins was down upon 'em."

"Is its appearance always the same?"

"I b'l'eve it is, but I ain't sart'in. Leastways, I could never see anything different. It always had the blanket thrown over it, and its head was as black as a stack of black cats. The first time I run ag'in it was down in the Staked Plain, where a party of us were arter a lot of Comanches that had made a raid on one of the settlements near the Texan frontier. I remember there was a kind of a drizzling rain

falling, and we was smoking our pipes, with our blankets drawn up round our chins, when the critter rode down on us, and stopped just as he did with you. There was four of us that blazed away at him, each one aiming at the spot where his heart would have been had he been like other animals; and, when his horse turned about and galloped away with him, without his showing the least uneasiness, you can make up your mind that we was slightly surprised. There was several of us that heard of the Terror of the Prairie, as he is called by some, and we concluded that this was the gentleman, and that a row was sure to take place; so we made ready for 'em, and we had one of the tallest scrimmages that night that any of us ever got mixed up in; but you see we was used to that sort of business, and it wasn't good policy for the Terror to come down on us and tell us to make ready. We was a little too much ready, and the red-skins got a little more than they counted on. We riddled a dozen of 'em, and got away without losing a man or a hoss, though most of us have got scars that were made in that muss."

"Wal," added Jo, "I won't take time to tell all I know 'bout that critter, which ain't much, 'cept in the way he has played the mischief round the country. I s'pose when he took a look at you down in the gulch, it meant that he and his folks were coming to visit you, and we got there just ahead of 'em."

"Captain Shields seemed to know nothing about him, at least he told nothing of what you have just described."

"Shields was in that party down on the Staked Plain, and got two bullets in him, that he carries to this day: so I reckon he does know something arter all."

"And he is somewhere in our neighborhood, unless he has taken a sudden departure."

"Yes," added Lightning Jo, in a husky whisper, and with a wild, scared look; "and he ain't fifty feet from where you're setting this minute."

CHAPTER XXII.

THOSE WHO ESCAPED.

At this startling announcement Egbert Rodman sprang to his feet, with a bound that carried him entirely over the fire, striking Lightning Jo with such sudden violence as to throw him backward almost flat upon the ground.

"What in thunder is the matter?" exclaimed the scout, laughing outright as he regained his seat; "did you prick you?"

The young man was not looking at Jo, but backward in the gloom, in which he discerned the unmistakable outlines of the terrible nondescript, known as the Terror of the Prairie. It was but a glance that he gained; for, while he looked, it began silently retreating into the gloom, like a phantom born and sent forth by the night, and returning again to its natural element.

Like a flash, Egbert raised his gun, pointed toward the point where it had vanished, and pulled the trigger; but the percussion exploded without firing the charge that had been wetted, during its rush through the swollen cañon.

"Never mind," remarked Jo, with a laugh, "it done just as much good as if you had fired it; so rest easy on that score."

"You needn't tell me that," was the dogged reply of Egbert; "every living creature has some vulnerable point, and that is no exception."

"All right; if you want to make yourself famous, just find the spot, and pop in a bullet there. Howsumever there always are some folks that think they know more nor others, and p'raps they do, and then p'raps ag'in they don't."

Egbert felt a little irritated at the taunting words of the scout—which irritation was doubtless increased by the keen sense he had of the rather ridiculous figure he had just made; but there was no use of showing any resentment toward Lightning Jo; and resuming his seat, he began withdrawing the damaged charge from his gun. When sufficiently composed, he asked the rather singular question:

"How many times do you suppose you have fired at this thing, Jo?"

"I don't know exactly; the first shot told me that it warn't any use; but I s'pose I've let fly at him a half-dozen times more nor less, and I've seen five times as many balls sent after him by others. What do you want to know that for?"

"In all these cases did you aim at any particular portion of the animal—his head or his body?"

"We always p'nted our bull-dogs at the spot where his heart would be reached—that is, providing he had any to reach."

"That proves beyond a doubt that the Terror can not be killed in that manner. How is it that you never aimed at his head?"

Lightning Jo seemed to be surprised at this question and stared rather wondering at Egbert before he replied:

"Hanged if I know what the reason is. You know it's the custom among us chaps to aim at the heart instead of the head, the same as we do in a buffalo, 'cause you're surer of wiping out the critter there than anywhere else. There's more than one critter that walks the airth that wouldn't mind a volley in the head, more than they would so many raindrops."

"Very well then; the next time you or I shoot at him we'll send the bullet into his head, and then, if he don't mind that, I'll be inclined to think there is something strange about it."

"You will, eh?" replied Jo, with a grunt. "that's very kind in you, and I hope you won't forget it."

"As you say the appearance of the Prairie Terror is always a sure omen of coming disaster, what, in your opinion, does its coming foretell in the present

instance? What additional calamity is about to overtake us?"

"We'll larn that afore long; there ain't any use trying to find out. All I care to find out is what has become of Lizzie, and as soon as the first streak of daylight comes I'm going to find out whether she's in the land of the living or not."

The heart of Egbert said "amen" to this, and his prayer was that the long, desolate night might hurry by, and the opportunity come for them to do something together for unraveling the fate of the maiden, for whom both entertained the strongest affection.

Egbert, at the advice of the scout, attempted to sleep—but he had too much on his mind to succeed in doing so. His dragging garments did not give him special discomfort, as the night was only moderately cool and Jo kept the fire burning quite vigorously.

But between his sad forebodings of the fate of Lizzie, whom he seemed to love with a devotion such as had never permeated his being before, and the haunting fear of another visit from the Terror of the Prairie, there was little likelihood of his falling asleep.

The strange tales that the scout had told him of this remarkable creature, and of his extraordinary meetings with him, produced their effect upon Egbert, who, although of a practical nature, with an intelligent mind, was not without a certain imagination, peculiar to those of his age, which made him susceptible to the influences of the time and the place of his surroundings.

The roar of the rushing cañon had died out entirely, and probably that very part over which the whites, men, women and animals, had been carried with such tremendous velocity, was now almost entirely dry again. Through the matted, overhanging branches Egbert caught the glimmer of several stars, showing that the storm had cleared away entirely. There was no moon, however, and, in the valley in which they had encamped, the darkness was so profound as to be absolutely impenetrable beyond the circle illuminated by the camp-fire.

Young Rodman found the suspense so intolerable, that he proposed that they should leave this spot and wander among the hills until daylight. He believed that they would encounter some of the survivors, and possibly might learn something regarding Lizzie, who might be in need of the very assistance that would thus be afforded her.

But Lightning Jo had made up his mind to remain where he was, and no persuasion could induce him to change his location. He declared that he could accomplish nothing by stumbling around in the dark, while Egbert would be pretty certain to break his neck in some of the pitfalls that were to be encountered at every step.

And without attempting to depict the dismal expedients which the wretched lover resorted to, to while away the unspeakably dreary hours, we now hasten forward to the moment when the unmistakable light of morning stole through the hills, and Lightning Jo, springing to his feet, declared that the moment had come when the terrible suspense was to end, and they were soon to learn the worst that had happened to the party and to the one dear one—Lizzie Manning.

The first point toward which the two directed their steps was the cañon, through which they had had their memorable passage. This was but a short distance away, and, upon being reached, it was found, as they had anticipated, entirely clear of running water. Here and there were muddy, stagnant pools collected in the hollows and cavities, but nothing of any living person or animal, or *débris* of wagons, was discerned.

"Had we not better descend and follow the cañon to the outlet?" asked Egbert. "We shall not miss any thing then on the way."

Lightning Joe acted upon the suggestion, and after a little searching for a safe means of descent, the bottom was reached, and they pursued their way in silence, agitated by strange emotions, as they recalled the memorable experience of a few nights before.

They walked side by side, neither breaking the impressive stillness by a word, but carefully scanning every foot of ground passed in quest of some remnant of those who had been their companions in the terrible descent.

Suddenly the scout pointed to a wagon-wheel that was driven in between two jutting points of rocks, where it had been immovably fixed by the tremendous momentum.

Both scanned it a few minutes, and, seeing nothing more, passed on for fully a quarter of a mile, when the basin to which reference has been made, was reached, and here a great surprise awaited them.

It being quite shallow, the water had been carried away by several outlets, and not a man had been borne beyond. Fragments of the wagons were scattered in every direction, and at one side of the dry lake were to be seen Captain Shields, Gibbons and a number of the men covering up a large grave, while seated around were several women with their children, as miserable and desolate-looking objects as could possibly be imagined.

Not having dared to hope that so many could have escaped, the two paused in mute silence and stared at them, their looks after the first startling shock being directed in anxious quest of the one—Lizzie Manning—a look that was unreserved by a sight of the beautiful maiden, for whom both were ready to do and dare any thing.

Still hoping that she might be somewhere in the vicinity, they hurried forward and put the all-important question.

Sad to say, no living person had seen her or knew aught regarding her.

And then their own sad story was told. All, of course, had been hurried irresistibly into this basin—some bruised and almost senseless. Three of the men were killed, and also a mother and her two children. The ghastly cargo of the wagon, containing the remains of those who had fallen in the fight in Dead Man's Gulch, was also there. The soldiers, who had charge of the women and children, clung bravely to them, and the shallowness of the water enabling the horses to touch bottom almost immediately, they were not long in floundering out upon dry land, where the miserable group huddled together until the coming of day should enable them to see where they were, and to do what was possible for themselves.

When the dawn of light showed them the dreadful number of inanimate bodies, their first proceeding was to give them a decent burial, as it was out of the question to think of taking them to Fort Adams after the destruction of the wagons. And so, from the contents of the wagons, lying everywhere, they gathered up a half-dozen shovels, and as many men went to work with such a vigor and skill that in a few minutes a large, shallow grave was dug, and into this all were tenderly placed and covered up from mortal sight, all shedding tears of the deepest sorrow over the terrible death that had been decreed by inexorable fate.

While they were thus employed, others were absent among the hills in quest of the mustangs, and Jo and Egbert had exchanged but a few words with their friends, when they began coming in with the animals, that were all browsing at no great distance.

Their purpose was to mount the horses as speedily as possible, and to make all haste to Fort Adams. The women and children were in a deplorable condition and needed care and a rest of several days before continuing their journey to Santa Fe.

When this proposal was mentioned to Lightning Jo he indorsed it at once, telling them to lose not a moment. They had not a particle of eatable food in their possession, and it was extremely difficult to procure any in these hills, which, rather singularly, were known to have been for years almost entirely devoid of game of any description. Consequently, as nothing at all was to be gained by remaining here, the dictate of prudence was that they should depart at the very moment they could make ready.

As a matter of course, Lizzie Manning was among the first that was missed by the group that huddled on the banks of the basin, and so great was the concern regarding her that during the darkness Captain Shields and two of the men groped around the neighborhood in quest of her, calling her name and searching along the shore of the basin for hours. The search was made more extended and thorough, when they had the daylight at their command, but it resulted in an entire failure. Not the least trace was gained, either of her or of the horse which she was known to be riding.

One of the men who had helped to bring in the mustangs took occasion to tell Lightning Jo, in a confidential way, that he had detected signs of Indians, and he believed there was quite a number among the hills, and that it was impossible that they should know nothing of the presence of the whites so near them.

This information surprised the scout and caused him no little uneasiness. He questioned the soldier closely, and became convinced that he was right, and that the whole company were in great danger of attack. Under these circumstances, he took it in hand himself, and told them all of the urgency of haste in reaching their destination.

Scarcely fifteen minutes had passed when every man was upon his mustang, and the females, with their offspring, were distributed among them. Lightning Jo and Egbert Rodman placed themselves at their head, and the scout cautiously led the way through another narrow pass for something like a quarter of a mile, when they reached the open prairie once more.

"And now go," he added, "and never pause or look back until you ride into the stockade of Fort Adams."

And his advice was taken and followed almost to the letter; but, even then, it is impossible to imagine whether they would have succeeded in reaching the shelter after all without being harassed by the Comanches, but for the fact that ere they had gone three miles they met a party of rescue sent out by Colonel Cleaves, who had become alarmed at their failure to come in during the night. Under the escort of this powerful company of cavalry, the journey was completed in safety, and we now bid them good-bye at the friendly fort and turn our attention to those in whom we have a more immediate interest.

CHAPTER XXIII. COMANCHE HONOR.

WITH the departure of Captain Shields and his party, Lightning Jo and Egbert Rodman set about the task of trailing the missing maiden, if such a proceeding lay within the range of human possibility.

There was something strange and mysterious in this failure upon the part of all to discover any traces of her or her horse. Had both or either of them been dead, this scarcely could have been the case. Every member of the party, excepting herself, had been accounted for, and was either buried in the quiet grave among the hills or else was within the stockade of Fort Adams, beyond the reach of the Comanches in the South-west.

"Where can she be?"

This was the question that the two men put to each other and to themselves a score of times in as many minutes, and to which no satisfactory answer

could be given. All was conjecture, and even that was of the most vague nature.

Lightning Jo had very little to say, but he was in deep thought as he moved morbidly about, with his eyes upon the ground, seeking out some clew by which he might take up the hunt for Lizzie, with some slight probability at least of success.

There were two facts which were constantly recurring to Egbert Rodman, and which caused him an apprehension positively tormenting. The Terror of the Prairie had been seen by himself and Lightning Jo but a few hours before, at no great distance from where they were standing at that moment, and he could not avoid connecting this with the disappearance of the maiden. Precisely in what way it was hard for him to define, but he was convinced beyond a doubt that the two bore some relation to each other.

Furthermore, the declaration of Lightning Jo that the appearance of this nondescript boded coming calamity might be said to have been verified in the present instance; for quickly on the heels of its vanishment came the knowledge of the disappearance of Lizzie and the presence of Comanches in these hills, proving the closeness of the connection between the two. The loss of the maiden to whom his heart clung with such yearning devotion was certainly the greatest calamity that had as yet befallen young Rodman, and he involuntarily shuddered as he recalled that awful ride down the cañon, followed as it had been in the case of Lizzie by some after experience, that was all the more appalling to her friends, inasmuch as they knew nothing positive of its nature, and could only indulge in the wildest conjecture.

The only thing that afforded any thing like relief or consolation to the lover was the fact that he had the companionship and assistance of Lightning Jo in this search. Whatever was possible to be done for her rescue and safety by mortal man would be done by this wonderful scout, who was already busy making ready, and fully satisfying himself before he fairly started to work in the matter.

Everything indicated that the two men could not remain long in these hills—for, aside from the fact that the demands of hunger could not be postponed for a much longer period, the probability began to present itself that the girl was also gone from the vicinity.

"Do you not think it likely," inquired Egbert, when his comrade paused for a moment, "that when she emerged from the basin, as she did so, that she has managed to reach some hiding-place among the rocks, where she still remains—perhaps asleep?"

This possibility seemed to have been entertained already by the scout, who instantly shook his head in the negative.

"If she'd have done that, some of the boys would have come across her boss, for he would have managed to get himself into the company of the other mustangs, and would have been seen by them, in looking for the others."

"But there are our own animals yet; we have seen nothing of them."

"But the boys did; they told me they see'd 'em both, and I'll have my critter in sight in less'n two minutes; see if I don't."

As he spoke, he uttered a low, quavering whistle, not very loud, but sufficiently so to be heard a distance of several hundred yards. Then pausing a moment he repeated the signal in precisely the same manner, and added, in his way:

"That animal will be here, if he's got forty Comanches trying to hold him."

"I only wish I could recover mine so easily," laughed Egbert, as the scout composedly sat down upon a large stone to await the coming of his faithful mustang, "but I am afraid Mahomet must go to the mountain in my case."

"When I parted company with mine last night, the understanding was that he was to go off and hunt a little something to eat on his own hook, and he expected to be told when I wanted him."

"And knowing that he will obey like an obedient child."

"Exactly—there he comes this minute," replied Jo, as the tread of some animal was heard but a short distance away.

"Look out, Jo, that it is nothing else," warned Egbert, stepping back, so as to give the scout free room for whatever might come.

"I know his footprint," was the response to this, accompanied at the same time by a precautionary movement, consisting in the guide raising the hammer of his rifle and bringing it to the front, where he could discharge it, if necessary, with the quickness of lightning, posing himself at the same time upon one foot, so as to be prepared to leap forward or backward as the case might be.

This precaution had scarcely been taken, when the mustang of Lightning Jo put in an appearance, accompanied by a Comanche Indian, who, sitting astride of the sagacious beast, was in blissful ignorance of whether he was being carried.

His position was the quiet one of ease and self-possession, showing that he had no thought of any impending danger. From this fancied security he was awakened by the sight of Lightning Jo, standing scarcely a dozen feet away, with his rifle pointed full at his breast.

The mustang at a word from his master stopped short, and thus the red-skin was brought face to face with the man, whom he recognized on the instant as the most deadly foe of the Comanche race.

"Get off that hoss, you old galoot! he belongs to me. Slide mighty quick, or I'll slide you!"

The substance of this was uttered in the Comanche tongue, so as to make sure of its being understood, and the action of the red-skin demonstrated that he

had no difficulty in comprehending it on the instant; for he slid off the back of the mustang as suddenly and as nimbly as if it had all at once become red-hot beneath him.

The savage held a long, beautiful rifle in his hand, and he was evidently on the alert, either for a chance to use it or to dodge away from his captor.

Had the circumstances been any different, the marvelous quickness of the copper-skin doubtless would have enabled him to accomplish his treacherous wish; but neither he nor any living Indian could play it on Lightning Jo. If he thought he could, let him try it—that was all.

The scout wasn't particular whether he made the attempt or not, as there could be but one result: but the moment the Comanche's feet touched ground he ordered him to approach within a half-dozen feet, and then drop his rifle to the earth. The red-skin showed some reluctance in obeying this; but when he caught the glitter of the dark eye fixed upon him, he changed his mind, and carried out the command with an amusing alacrity.

"Where are the rest of you devils?" was the first rather pointed inquiry, uttered also in the Comanche tongue, and with the muzzle of the rifle pointed threateningly at the breast of the savage, who replied with a gesture peculiarly his own:

"There are but a few among the hills—no more than so many (holding up the fingers of one hand); they are hunting for food; they will soon take their departure to join their brother-hunters far to the south."

"It would be a thundering sight better if they'd all join each other down below," was the conclusion of Jo, who continued his cross-examination:

"Have any gone away in the night? Did any of the Comanches depart before daybreak?"

"No; there was none here."

The slight hesitancy: a certain peculiarity that accompanied this reply, convinced Jo, on the instant, that the Indian was telling a downright falsehood, and that, after all, he was gaining a slight clew to the trail of the missing maiden.

His conclusion was that there were a few Indians among the hills, but that the greater majority had left before daybreak. Precisely why they had done so was more than he could understand; but their departure unquestionably had something to do with the disappearance of Lizzie Manning.

Jo was rather abrupt in his questioning, for the next was the pointed demand:

"Tell me where the great chief, Swico-Cheque, is; I want to raise his hair."

The look that crossed the coppery face of the savage said as plainly as words could have done, that he would have been extremely delighted to see the scout attempt such a thing.

"I don't know where he is," he replied, without any embarrassment in his manner; "he went away before the light came."

There it was! the incautious Indian had let it out after all. Swico-Cheque had taken his departure with the band that went off in the stillness of the night.

The red-skin seemed entirely unaware of the slip he had made, and awaited the further questioning of his captor as the heroic martyr awaits the creeping up of the consuming blaze.

"I don't know as I want anything more of you," remarked the scout, "so I guess you can travel. It would hardly be the thing to scalp you after I took you prisoner, though I'm sure you deserve it."

This order was unexpected and surprising to the Indian, who stared a moment, as if uncertain that he had heard aright.

"Come, 'light out of this, old greaser!'" added Jo, the next instant.

This was all-sufficient. The Comanche stooped down, and picking up his rifle, turned about with a certain dignity and walked slowly away, disdaining to run, although no doubt anxious to get out of that immediate neighborhood with as little delay as possible.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A DESPERATE HOPE.

It was not the nature of Lightning Jo to remain idle when he had any work like the present on hand, and leaping upon the back of his mustang, he told Egbert to follow.

"I'm not going to ride and make you walk," he laughed; "we haven't started yet, but are only making ready. Come along."

He rode scarcely a hundred yards through the roughest part of the hills, when he dismounted in a dense mass of undergrowth, and, without fastening his mustang, said a few words to him, which would insure his remaining where he was until his return, by which time Jo was quite confident that he could secure an animal also for Egbert, as it was indispensable that he should have one at once.

When it was certain that there were Indians in the immediate vicinity, the greatest caution was necessary upon the part of our two friends, and Lightning Jo made his way through the ravines, gorges and hills, with as much circumspection as if he were reconnoitering a Comanche camp. When he halted, they were on the very summit of one of the highest peaks of this spur of mountains, which afforded them a most extensive view of the surrounding prairie.

Glancing at Jo, Egbert saw that he was looking off to the westward, with an attentive, searching look that indicated something; and, as he did not remove his gaze from that point, he imitated him, straining his vision to the utmost.

The young man had looked but a moment, when he detected a party of horsemen moving in a south-westerly direction. They were so far away that it was impossible to identify them; but there was

scarcely a doubt of their being Indians, and most probably the very ones for whom Lightning Jo was searching.

"Well, you see them, do you?" was the question of Jo, as he looked around and started to move away.

"I s'pose you know 'em, too?"

"I suspect that they are Indians; but I conclude that not from any certain knowledge of my own, but simply infer it."

"Yes; they're the Comanches that left the hills before daylight. Swico-Cheque, the biggest red-devil that walks the earth, is at their head. He's got enough of butting his head ag'in' United States soldiers, and he's off to recruit his health."

"But what of her—of Lizzie?" asked Egbert, in a trembling voice, dreading to hear the answer that he was almost sure would come.

"Why, she's with him, of course. He'll keep her till he gets tired of her, and then he'll have some more fringe for his hunting-shirt."

These words were uttered in the very desperation of vengefulness, and the scout wheeled about with a spiteful air, and exclaimed:

"Stay here till I come back! If you see any of the infernal copper-skins, bore a hole through 'em. If you see anybody, break his head! Look out for yourself! keep cautious, and rest easy till I come back. I won't be gone long."

And with this rather contradictory advice, Lightning Jo wheeled about, plunged down the hill, and was gone almost on the instant.

He had been gone but a short time, when the near crack of a rifle broke the stillness, and Egbert started and looked around, thinking that, perhaps, some treacherous Comanche had stolen up and sent a bullet after him; but he could see nothing, and he concluded that Lightning Jo had something to do with the discharge of the gun, as, indeed, it seemed to have a certain familiar sound.

But little time was given him for speculation when the scout himself put in an appearance.

"Come, Roddy," said he. "I've found your hoss; we're ready now; and there's no use in waiting longer."

"Where did you find him?" asked Egbert, not a little surprised and delighted at the unexpected news.

"There was a red-skin on him; he ain't there now, and I guess won't bother us more."

Sure enough, a few rods away, the identical steed which Egbert had ridden from Dead Man's Gulch was found secured to a bush, and leaping upon his back, it required but a few minutes for the two comrades to reach the spot where the faithful mustang of Lightning Jo was awaiting the return of his master.

"Now, let us get out of this infernal place," added the scout, as the two reined up their animals, side by side.

"Whither do we direct our course?" asked Egbert.

"Straight after them devils, and we're never to stop till we catch up with Swico, and him and me square up our accounts."

A little care and patience, and in a few minutes the two horsemen found themselves upon the edge of the prairie, and they headed due west, straight in the path taken by Swico-Cheque and his band, and the mustangs were instantly put to a full run.

About the middle of the forenoon, when the heroic Egbert felt that he was taxing himself beyond his strength, they struck a deserted camp, where a party of United States cavalry, ranging through the country upon a scout, had spent the previous night. Here were found the remains and fragments of their meal all scattered about, and it gave to both what they much needed—a nourishing, substantial meal.

"Now," said he, straightening up, like a giant refreshed with new wine, "I am ready for any thing, I don't care what it is."

"I think you'll get enough of it afore long," was the significant reply of Lightning Jo, adding, "we're close onto the copper-skins, and if I ain't mistook more than I ever was in my life, we'll strike their camp inside of an hour.

This was startling news, but was singularly verified; for scarcely a half-hour had passed when the scout, who was riding a short distance in advance, ascended a small swell of the prairie and almost the instant he reached the top, wheeled his mustang about and galloped back again, motioning to Egbert to do the same.

"We've reached their camp," he said, in explanation, and cautioning the bewildered man to resist every temptation to stir a foot from the spot until his return, the scout moved up the prairie-swell again. Egbert saw him crouch down like a panther about to leap upon its prey, and then he vanished from view as noiselessly as a shadow, leaving the lover to the trying task of waiting, fearing, hoping, watching, listening, and to despair. Lightning Jo passed down the opposite side of the swell, and as was his custom in reconnoitering the camp of a foe, he made a circuitous route by a small cluster of stunted trees, which struck him as offering the very shelter he so much needed.

He had no thought of any of his foes being here, but he had scarcely approached the margin when he became certain that he was close upon one or more of them.

In his stealthy manner he insinuated himself among the trees, and the next instant was greeted with the sight of the great Comanche chieftain, Swico-Cheque, reclining upon the ground in a sound slumber.

CHAPTER XXV.

AT LAST.

Yes; there lay the great Comanche chieftain, Swico-Cheque, sunk into a heavy slumber—deep and

profound—and yet of that character which would have required but the slightest noise to awake.

Lightning Jo paused in his creeping, stealthy movement, and stared at the savage, his own eyes gleaming with an exultation as ferocious as would have been that of the red-skin himself, had their relative positions been changed. The murderous and outrageous crimes of which this fiend had been guilty, his relentless war upon unoffending whites, his scores of murders of weak, defenseless women, and even the nursing babe, had placed him outside the pale of human mercy, and there was not a settler or soldier in the South-west who knew of his revolting character that did not feel that he deserved to be strangled to death, or put out of the way by any means that happened to present itself.

He had on, this moment, the very hunting-shirt to which reference has been made, fringed around with a broad band of human hair, from the long, dark, flowing tresses of the innocent virgin, to the light, silvery locks of prattling children. And his seamed face, daubed and smirched with paint, had the horrid look of that of some sleeping gorilla that had been feasting upon its human meal.

And yet in this moment of triumph, when Jo felt that he had him at last, there came a strange feeling to the scout, which can be understood, perhaps, by his whispered exclamation to himself.

"Confound it! it will look as if I was afraid of him, when I shouldn't like anything better than to have a fair stand-up fight. He might keep all the knives he wanted, and I would use nothing but my fists. How I should like to play some trick upon the infernal skunk!"

Ay! at this very time, when he had everything to make him serious and thoughtful, there came a strange reaction over Jo, and an irresistible desire to play one of his practical jokes upon the Comanche. He concluded to wake him up to witness his own demise—but to arouse him in an original fashion.

It was a delicate task; but with that skill for which the scout was noted, he drew out his flask and poured out a stream of powder, moving the flask along from a point on the ground directly beside the Comanche's ear, for several feet away—the particles all being united, so that the connection was perfect. Then, when everything was safe, Jo drew a lucifer from the little safe he always carried about him, and struck it upon the bottom of his foot. As it ignited he held the blaze close to the black grains, and then spoke:

"Swico, my own loved cherub—"

This was enough; these words were barely uttered, when his snaky eyes opened, just in time to see a serpentine line of fire rushing toward him, and going off in a big puff directly under his ear, in a way that scorched his face and caused him to leap to his feet, with a howl, followed by an instant rush out from among the trees. He had caught a glimpse of his old enemy through the whizzing, and he was gone like a shot.

This was unexpected by Jo, who had hoped that he would maintain his ground, and the two would have fought out their fight on the spot. He did not anticipate any such flight as this, which was made so suddenly that he had no time to interfere ere he was gone.

The scout had the intense chagrin, also, of feeling that his propensity for waggery had led into a piece of foolishness that most likely would militate against the captive Lizzie. Knowing that she had one friend, at least, so near at hand, they would be sure to adopt greater precautions, and instead of waiting to be attacked by Lightning Jo, would, most probably, attack him.

And acting upon this supposition, he backed out as speedily as possible, and resumed his circuitous approach to the camp-fire of the Comanches—the locality of which up to this time he had been able to determine only by the smoke that rose from the opposite side of a small ridge several rods away.

But the chief, Swico-Cheque, suspecting that a large party of United States cavalry were upon his heels, concluded that the safest plan for him was to get away with as little delay as possible, to accomplish which he sent back several of his warriors to dispose of Lightning Jo, and to keep the rest in check until he could secure his retreat with his prize.

Consequently the scout had stolen along over the broken ground but a rod or two when he found himself face to face with a couple of herculean warriors, who, approaching the cluster of trees in the same cautious manner, encountered the great Indian-fighter sooner than was anticipated by either party.

"That's good!" exclaimed Jo, "for now I will get warmed up to business. I'll try a left-hander straight from the shoulder upon this chap, and a right upon 'other.'

The terrific blows were simultaneous with the conclusion, the startled red-skins turning back summersets upon the ground, where, with an incredible celerity, the frightful bowie-knife, which Jo whipped out from behind his neck, completed the ghastly work.

"Ain't there any more?" he growled, glaring like a wild beast thirsting for prey. "By heavens, if they don't come to me, I'll go to them!"

And he was striding directly toward the camp of the Comanches, but ere he could advance half-way, who should leap into view but young Egbert Rodman, his face white and scared, and panting from excitement and the great exertions he had made to find his companion.

"Oh, Jo! there's something wrong!" he gasped; "the Comanches are fooling us both, and we shall not get Lizzie after all."

"What's up? What's the matter?" demanded the scout, his muscles all quiver.

"They are retreating; I heard the tramp of their horses' feet on the other side the ridge, and, oh, heavens! Jo, I heard the moans of a woman—it must have been Lizzie—and that set my brain on fire, and scarcely knowing what I did I left both the horses and rushed to the ridge—but they were gone; I could see nothing of them, and then I turned to hunt for you. In God's name, can we do nothing?"

Scarcely giving his companion time to finish his words, and vouchsafing no reply, Lightning Jo shot over the hill like an arrow, straight in the path of the fleeing Comanches. He did not pause to leap upon the back of his own mustang; he had no time for that.

Down the hollow, between the ridges, he shot like a thunderbolt. His practiced eye saw on the ground around him the prints of the horses' flying feet, and he knew that he was on the right track. Still he saw nothing of them—but look! Six horsemen on a full gallop were seen thundering over the ridge in a direction at right-angles to the one he was pursuing—fleeing as they supposed from three times their number, but in reality from a single man.

The excited scout could not avoid giving out his wild, peculiar yell, as he recognized among the half-dozen the chieftain Swico, and saw that he held in his black arms the beautiful Lizzie Manning.

The Comanches heard that strange yell, and identified it. Only one living man could give utterance to that frightful cry, and once heard it could never be forgotten. They glanced over their shoulders and saw the single man bearing down upon them; but they continued their headlong flight, and the next moment were shut out, for the time, from view, by the interposing ridge over which they had just passed.

No doubt they believed that the single scout, rushing down upon them at such terrific speed, had a whole company upon his heels, and they could not pause, just then, for the delightful privilege of killing such a noted enemy as he.

Lightning Jo kept on down the hollow, following a course at right-angles to the one taken by the Comanches, until he reached the point where they had gone over, when he bounded up the declivity, expecting to come up with them the next minute.

As he did so he was met by the discharge of two rifles—one of the bullets striking him in the fleshy part of the thigh; but although the sting instantly warned him of what had taken place, he did not pause or even look down to see how serious was the wound, but he made straight for the Indians, who were now in full view again.

But hold! what meant that which he now saw? Instead of six, there were but five Comanches, and a glance sufficed to show that the missing one was Swico-Cheque, with the maid.

By what means had he disappeared in such a sudden and mysterious manner?

The moment Lightning Jo became aware of the state of things he paused. His experienced eye told him that the Comanche must have made another turn, the instant he passed over the ridge, leaving his comrades, and taking a course precisely opposite to that of the scout, so that indeed the two actually met, with the back of the ridge shutting out each from the view of the other.

One sweep of his eagle eye was sufficient to tell Jo this, and he made straight for the stunted trees, somewhat similar to those in which he had first met him, certain that Swico was either among them, or fleeing beyond.

The correctness of this conclusion was verified the next moment, by a glimpse of the red devil, with his horse still under full speed, fleeing up the hollow beyond the clump of trees, apparently with every prospect of making good his escape.

Jo was through the clump of trees in an instant, and then, as he found himself gaining rapidly, he gave out his panther-like yell. The Comanche, who was no more than a hundred yards distant, managed to turn in his saddle, and pointed his rifle at the scout, who did the same.

But the treacherous red-skin, with a cowardice peculiarly his own, forced the form of Lizzie Manning directly in front of him, like a shield, and succeeded in screening himself in such a way that Jo found he was as likely to strike the one as the other.

In this strait it only remained for the scout to attempt to escape the bullet, and he made a lightning-like leap to one side; marvelous as was his quickness, it could not equal that of a rifle-ball, and he was struck.

"You shan't escape me yet," hissed Jo, as he dashed in with the purpose of drawing the Comanche from his horse, and finishing him with his knife.

With superhuman energy he passed fully one-half the intervening distance, ere the startled Swico could urge his steed forward again, and then he dropped like a shot to the earth.

Even then he would not yield—but with an amazing power of will, rolled over on his face, and rose on his uninjured knee. In this position he raised his rifle again; but the malignant Comanche had his eye upon him, and the same instant the fainting form of the girl was whirled around in his front, and the infuriated scout, who, for an instant, had meditated shooting both, finding himself baffled at every point, dropped back again in despair.

"No use; I may as well go under," he muttered, giving up entirely.

The exulting Comanche, still fearful of the wounded man's rifle, rode on, intending to return at his leisure and scalp the man who had been so long such an effective foe.

But his career was at an end. He was still looking at the prostrate form of the scout, when the near crack of a rifle broke the stillness, and the great

Comanche chieftain, Swico-Cheque, rolled from his mustang, shot through the heart!

In his fall he dragged Lizzie Manning with him, and he would have slain her in his dying moments, had he not been killed as instantly as if stricken by a bolt from heaven.

The maiden, rallying to a sense of her terrible position, tore herself loose, and the next moment was caught in the arms of Egbert Rodman.

"Thank God! thank God!" he exclaimed, as he pressed her to his heart; "saved at last!"

She joined her murmurs of thanksgiving with his, and then with a noble sympathy characteristic of her, she raised her head and said:

"Poor Jo is hurt; and I'm afraid he's killed! Let us go to him."

The two hurried down the hollow where the scout lay as motionless as if dead; but he roused up when he saw them.

"I'm pretty badly hurt," said he, "but if I can call my hoss here, I think I can ride him to the fort. You'd better get that one yonder for the gal. Bless your heart! I'm glad to see you alive," he added, with a kindly light beaming in his dark eyes. "I say, Roddy, help me down to where that red-skin lays. I want to take a look at him."

Lightning Joe made the signal to his mustang, and then, almost carried by his friend, he was helped to where the stiffening body of Swico-Cheque lay stretched upon the earth.

"I won't scalp him," muttered the scout, as he looked at him, "cause he can't see it, but I'll take charge of that fancy dress of his, and send it to Washington for the Peace Commissioners to look at."

And this was done.*

A few minutes later, the mustang of Lightning Jo came trotting over the ridge, followed by the horse of Egbert. With considerable care the wounded scout was placed upon it; Lizzie mounted the Indian horse, and the three instantly started on their journey to Fort Adams, which was reached without any incident worthy of mention. The other ladies were found just preparing to start for Santa Fe under a strong escort. Egbert and Lizzie joined them, after being assured by the surgeon of the fort that the wounds of Lightning Jo were not of a serious nature, and barring accidents, he was sure soon to recover his usual strength and activity again.

Tried in the fire, as were the two lovers, the bond of love was so deepened and purified, that nothing could occur to weaken and mar it; and when, some months later, the handsome couple were united in Santa Fe—the jolliest guest of all, and the one in most general favor, was Lightning Jo, who had a story to tell the young husband and wife when he gained the first opportunity to see them alone. This story was nothing more nor less than the clearing up of the mystery of the Terror of the Prairie, as he had learned it from a Comanche prisoner brought into the fort. This noted creature and Swico-Cheque, the Comanche chief, were the same. It was a ruse of the sagacious red-skin by which he obtained any desired knowledge of a party he intended to attack. Well aware of the superstitious nature of the bordermen, he blackened his face in a fantastic manner, and wrapped several thick blankets about his body. These were bullet-proof, and although he incurred great risk of being killed, and was wounded more than once, yet it was left for Egbert Rodman to fire the bullet that killed Swico-Cheque, the Terror of the Prairie, and at the same time gained him his lovely wife.

* A short time ago, while on a visit to the Land Office, I was shown by Mr. Wilson, the accomplished Commissioner, a singular relic of a late fight on the Plains. It was a garment taken from an Indian chief, after death. A shirt of buck-skin, made without the usual ornamentation of beads and porcupine quills, yet graced with something quite novel in the decorative way—a full, long fringe, formed of the hair of white women and children. It was a ghastly adornment—indeed, the entire garment was a very unpleasant thing to inspect. The only point in it on which the eye could rest without horror or pity, was a small round hole, beneath which the raging heart of a human wild beast came one day to a full stop.—*Correspondence N. Y. Tribune*.

THE END.

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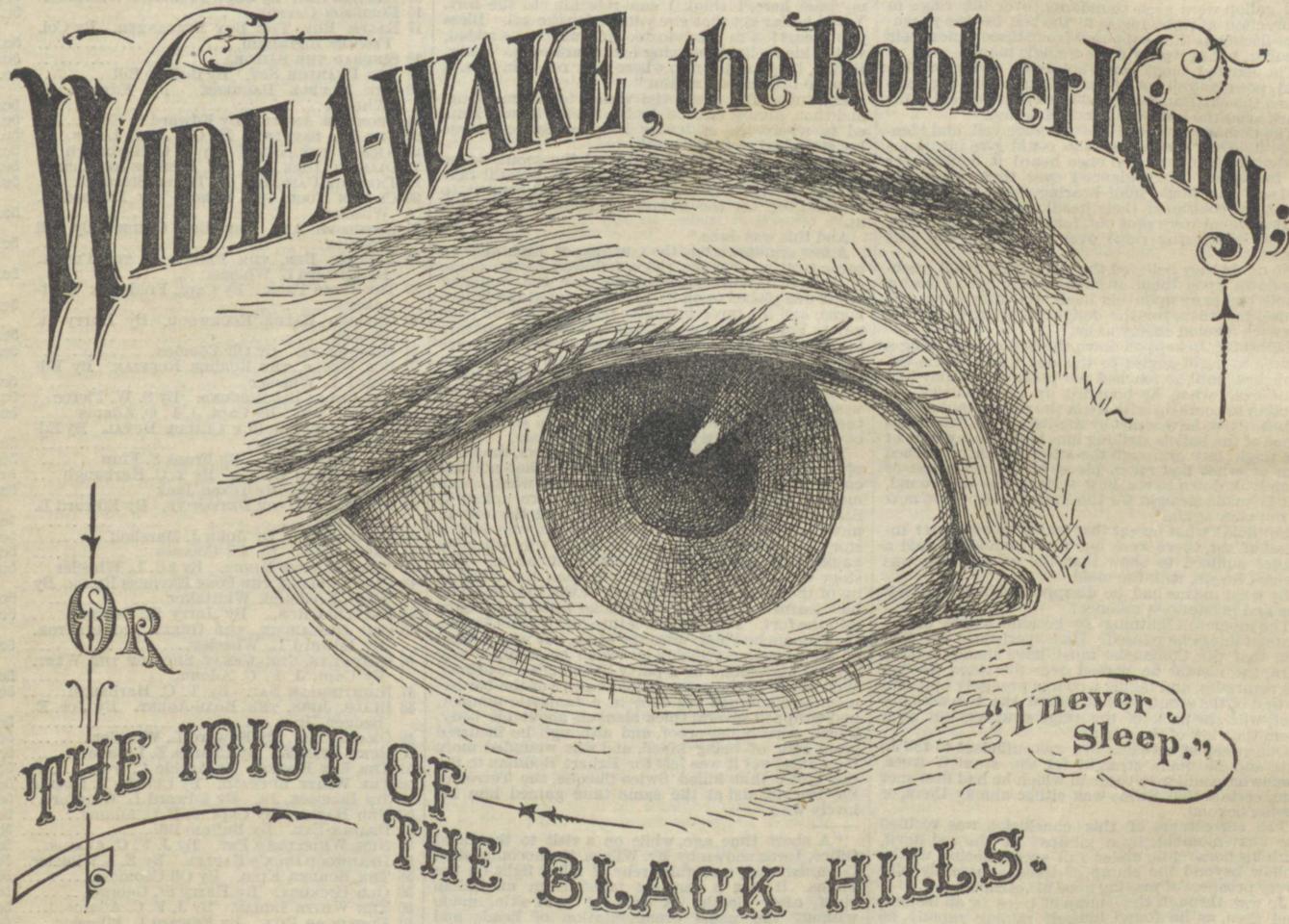
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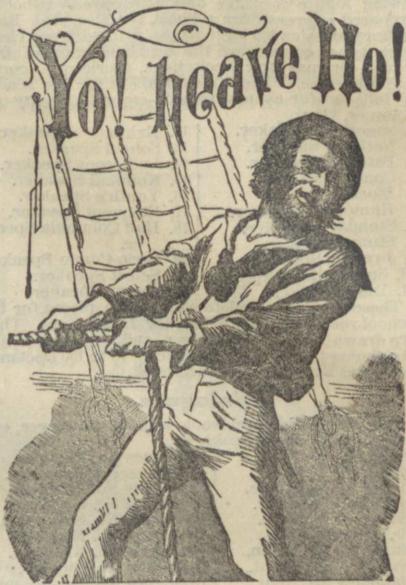
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